MEHALAH

A STORY OF THE
SALT MARSHES

Darell.

Trewornan, Cornwall.

1915.

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MEHALAH

VOL. I.

MEHALAH

A STORY OF THE SALT MARSHES

IN TWO VOLUMES

VOL. I.

LONDON
SMITH, ELDER, & CO., 15 WATERLOO PLACE
1880

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THE FIRST VOLUME.

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MEHALAH:

A STORY OF THE SALT MARSHES.

CHAPTER I.

THE RAY.

Between the mouths of the Blackwater and the Colne, on the east coast of Essex, lies an extensive marshy tract veined and freckled in every part with water. It is a wide waste of debatable ground contested by sea and land, subject to incessant incursions from the former, but stubbornly maintained by the latter. At high tide the appearance is that of a vast surface of moss or Sargasso weed floating on the sea, with rents and patches of shining water traversing and dappling it in all directions. The creeks, some of considerable length and breadth, extend many miles inland, and are arteries whence branches out a

fibrous tissue of smaller channels, flushed with water twice in the twenty-four hours. At noon-tides, and especially at the equinoxes, the sea asserts its royalty over this vast region, and overflows the whole, leaving standing out of the flood only the long island of Mersea, and the lesser islet, called the Ray. This latter is a hill of gravel rising from the heart of the Marshes, crowned with ancient thorntrees, and possessing, what is denied the mainland, an unfailing spring of purest water. At ebb, the Ray can only be reached from the old Roman causeway, called the Strood, over which runs the road from Colchester to Mersea Isle, connecting formerly the city of the Trinobantes with the station of the count of the Saxon shore. But even at ebb, the Ray is not approachable by land unless the sun or east wind has parched the ooze into brick; and then the way is long, tedious and tortuous, among bitter pools and over shining creeks. It was perhaps because this ridge of high ground was so inaccessible, so well protected by nature, that the ancient inhabitants had erected on it a *rath*, or fortified camp of wooden logs, which left its name to the place long after the timber defences had rotted away.

A more desolate region can scarce be conceived, and yet it is not without beauty. In summer, the thrift mantles the marshes with shot satin, passing through all gradations of tint from maiden's blush to lily white. Thereafter a purple glow steals over the waste, as the sea lavender bursts into flower, and simultaneously every creek and pool is royally fringed with sea aster. A little later the glass-wort, that shot up green and transparent as emerald glass in the early spring, turns to every tinge of carmine.

When all vegetation ceases to live, and goes to sleep, the marshes are alive and wakeful with countless wild fowl. At all times they are haunted with sea mews and roysten crows, in winter they teem with wild duck and grey geese. The stately heron loves to wade in the pools, occasionally the whooper swan sounds his loud trumpet, and flashes a white reflection in the still blue waters of the fleets. The plaintive pipe of the curlew is familiar to those who frequent these marshes, and the barking of the brent geese as they return from their northern breeding places is heard in November.

At the close of last century there stood on the Ray a small farmhouse built of tarred wreckage timber, and roofed with red pan-tiles. The

twisted thorntrees about it afforded some, but slight, shelter. Under the little cliff of gravel was a good beach, termed a 'hard.'

On an evening towards the close of September, a man stood in this farmhouse by the hearth, on which burnt a piece of wreckwood, opposite an old woman, who crouched shivering with ague in a chair on the other side. He was a strongly built man of about thirty-five, wearing fisherman's boots, a brown coat and a red plush waistcoat. His hair was black, raked over his brow. His cheekbones were high; his eyes dark, eager, intelligent, but fierce in expression. His nose was aquiline, and would have given a certain nobility to his countenance, had not his huge jaws and heavy chin contributed an animal cast to his face.

He leaned on his duck-gun, and glared from under his pent-house brows and thatch of black hair over the head of the old woman at a girl who stood behind, leaning on the back of her mother's chair, and who returned his stare with a look of defiance from her brown eyes.

The girl might have been taken for a sailor boy, as she leaned over the chairback, but for the profusion of her black hair. She wore a blue knitted guernsey covering body and arms, and

across the breast, woven in red wool, was the name of the vessel, 'Gloriana.' The guernsey had been knitted for one of the crew of a ship of this name, but had come into the girl's possession. On her head she wore the scarlet woven cap of a boatman.

The one-pane window at the side of the fireplace faced the west, and the evening sun lit her brown gipsy face, burnt in her large eyes, and made coppery lights in her dark hair.

The old woman was shivering with the ague, and shook the chair on which her daughter leaned; a cold sweat ran off her brow, and every now and then she raised a white faltering hand to wipe the drops away that hung on her eyebrows like rain on thatching.

'I did not catch the chill here,' she said. 'I ketched it more than thirty years ago when I was on Mersea Isle, and it has stuck in my marrow ever since. But there is no ague on the Ray. This is the healthiest place in the world, Mehalah has never caught the ague on it. I do not wish ever to leave it, and to lay my bones elsewhere.'

'Then you will have to pay your rent punctually,' said the man in a dry tone, not looking at her, but at her daughter.

'Please the Lord so we shall, as we ever have

done,' answered the woman; 'but when the chill comes on me——'

'Oh, curse the chill,' interrupted the man; 'who cares for that except perhaps Glory yonder, who has to work for both of you. Is it so, Glory?'

The girl thus addressed did not answer, but folded her arms on the chairback, and leaned her chin upon them. She seemed at that moment like a wary cat watching a threatening dog, and ready at a moment to show her claws and show desperate battle, not out of malice, but in self-defence.

'Why, but for you sitting there, sweating and jabbering, Glory would not be bound to this lone islet, but would go out and see the world, and taste life. She grows here like a mushroom, she does not live. Is it not so, Glory?'

The girl's face was no longer lit by the declining sun, which had glided further north-west, but the flames of the driftwood flickered in her large eyes that met those of the man, and the cap was still illumined by the evening glow, a scarlet blaze against the indigo gloom.

'Have you lost your tongue, Glory?' asked the man, impatiently striking the bricks with the butt end of his gun.

'Why do you not speak, Mehalah?' said the mother, turning her wan wet face aside, to catch a glimpse of her daughter.

'I've answered him fifty times,' said the girl.

'No,' protested the old woman feebly, 'you have not spoken a word to Master Rebow.'

'By God, she is right,' broke in the man. 'The little devil has a tongue in each eye, and she has been telling me with each a thousand times that she hates me. Eh, Glory?'

The girl rose erect, set her teeth, and turned her face aside, and looked out at the little window on the decaying light.

Rebow laughed aloud.

'She hated me before, and now she hates me worse, because I have become her landlord. I have bought the Ray for eight hundred pounds. The Ray is mine, I tell you. Mistress Sharland, you will henceforth have to pay *me* the rent, to me and to none other. I am your landlord, and Michaelmas is next week.'

'The rent shall be paid, Elijah!' said the widow.

'The Ray is mine,' pursued Rebow, swelling with pride. 'I have bought it with my own money—eight hundred pounds. I could stubb

up the trees if I would. I could cart muck into the well and choke it if I would. I could pull down the stables and break them up for firewood if I chose. All here is mine, the Ray, the marshes, and the saltings,[1] the creeks, the fleets, the farm. That is mine,' said he, striking the wall with his gun, 'and that is mine,' dashing the butt end against the hearth; 'and you are mine, and Glory is mine.'

'That never,' said the girl stepping forward, and confronting him with dauntless eye and firm lips and folded arms.

'Eh! Gloriana! have I roused you?' exclaimed Elijah Rebow, with a flash of exultation in his fierce eyes. 'I said that the house and the marshes, and the saltings are mine, I have bought them. And your mother and you are mine.'

'Never,' repeated the girl.

'But I say yes.'

'We are your tenants, Elijah,' observed the widow nervously interposing. 'Do not let Mehalah anger you. She has been reared here in solitude, and she does not know the ways of men. She means nothing by her manner.'

[1] A salting is land occasionally flooded, otherwise serving as pasturage. A marsh is a reclaimed salting, enclosed within a sea-wall.

'I do,' said the girl, 'and he knows it.'

'She is a headlong child,' pursued the old woman, 'and when she fares to say or do a thing, there is no staying tongue or hand. Do not mind her, master.'

The man paid no heed to the woman's words, but fixed his attention on the girl. Neither spoke. It was as though a war of wills was proclaimed and begun. He sought to beat down her defences with the force of his resolve flung at her from his dark eyes, and she parried it dauntlessly with her pride.

'By God!' he said at last, 'I have never seen anywhere else a girl of your sort. There is none elsewhere. I like you.'

'I knew it,' said the mother with feeble triumph in her palsied voice. 'She is a right good girl at heart, true as steel, and as tough in fibre.'

'I have bought the house and the pasture, and the marshes and the saltings,' said Elijah sulkily, 'and all that thereon is. You are mine, Glory! You cannot escape me. Give me your hand.'

She remained motionless, with folded arms. He laid his heavy palm on her shoulder.

'Give me your hand, and mine is light; I will help you. Let me lay it on you and it will

crush you. Escape it you cannot. This way or that. My hand will clasp or crush.'

She did not stir.

'The wild fowl that fly here are mine, the fish that swim in the fleets are mine,' he went on; 'I can shoot and net them.'

'So can I, and so can anyone,' said the girl haughtily.

'Let them try it on,' said Elijah; 'I am not one to be trifled with, as the world well knows. I will bear no poaching here. I have bought the Ray, and the fish are mine, and the fowl are mine, and you are mine also. Let him touch who dares.'

'The wild fowl are free for any man to shoot, the fish are free for any man to net,' said the girl scornfully.

'That is not my doctrine,' answered Elijah. 'What is on my soil and in my waters is mine, I may do with them what I will, and so also all that lives on my estate is mine.' Returning with doggedness to his point, 'As you live in my house and on my land, you are mine.'

'Mother,' said the girl, 'give him notice, and quit the Ray.'

'I could not do it, Mehalah, I could not do it,'

answered the woman. 'I've lived all my life on the marshes, and I cannot quit them. But this is a healthy spot, and not like the marshes of Dairy House where once we were, and where I ketched the chill.'

'You cannot go till you have paid me the rent,' said Rebow.

'That,' answered Mehalah, 'we will do assuredly.'

'So you promise, Glory!' said Rebow. 'But should you fail to do it, I could take every stick here.—That chair in which your mother shivers, those dishes yonder, the bed you sleep in, the sprucehutch [1] in which you keep your clothes. I could pluck the clock, the heart of the house, out of it. I could tear that defiant red cap off your head. I could drive you both out without a cover into the whistling east wind and biting frost.'

'I tell you, we can and we will pay.'

'But should you not be able at any time, I warn you what to expect. I've a fancy for that jersey you wear with "Gloriana" right across the breast. I'll pull it off and draw it on myself.' He ground his teeth. 'I will have it, if only to wrap me in, in my grave. I will cross my arms

[1] Cypress-chest.

over it, as you do now, and set my teeth, and not a devil in hell shall tear it off me.'

'I tell you we will pay.'

'Let me alone, let me talk. This is better than money. I will rip the tiling off the roof and fling it down between the rafters, if you refuse to stir; I will cast it at your mother and you, Glory. The red cap will not protract your skull from a tile, will it? And yet you say, I am not your master. You do not belong to me, as do the marshes and the saltings, and the wild duck.'

'I tell you we will pay,' repeated the girl passionately, as she wrenched her shoulder from his iron grip.

'You don't belong to me!' jeered Elijah. Then slapping the arm of the widow's chair, and pointing over his shoulder at Mehalah, he said scornfully: 'She says she does not belong to me, as though she believed it. But she does, and you do, and so does that chair, and the log that smoulders on the hearth, and the very hearth itself, with its heat, the hungry ever devouring belly of the house. I've bought the Ray and all that is on it for eight hundred pounds. I saw it on the paper, it stands in writing and may not be broke through. Lawyers scripture binds and

looses as Bible scripture. I will stick to my rights, to every thread and breath of them. She is mine.'

'But, Elijah, be reasonable,' said the widow, lifting her hand appealingly. The fit of ague was passing away. 'We are in a Christian land. We are not slaves to be bought and sold like cattle.'

'If you cannot pay the rent, I can take everything from you. I can throw you out of this chair down on those bricks. I can take the crock and all the meat in it. I can take the bed on which you sleep. I can take the clothes off your back.' Turning suddenly round on the girl he glared, 'I will rip the jersey off her, and wear it till I rot. I will pull the red cap off her head and lay it on my heart to keep it warm. None shall say me nay. Tell me, mistress, what are you, what is she, without house and bed and clothing? I will take her gun, I will swamp her boat. I will trample down your garden. I will drive you both down with my dogs upon the saltings at the spring tide, at the full of moon. You shall not shelter here, on my island, if you will not pay. I tell you, I have bought the Ray. I gave for it eight hundred pounds.'

'But Elijah,' protested the old woman, 'do not be so angry. We are sure to pay.'

'We will pay him, mother, and then he cannot open his mouth against us.' At that moment the door flew open, and two men entered, one young, the other old.

'There is the money,' said the girl, as the latter laid a canvas bag on the table.

'We've sold the sheep—at least Abraham has,' said the young man joyously, as he held out his hand. 'Sold them well, too, Glory!'

The girl's entire face was transformed. The cloud that had hung over it cleared, the hard eyes softened, and a kindly light beamed from them. The set lips became flexible and smiled. Elijah saw and noted the change, and his brow grew darker, his eye more threatening.

Mehalah strode forward, and held out her hand to clasp that offered her. Elijah swung his musket suddenly about, and unless she had hastily recoiled, the barrel would have struck, perhaps broken, her wrist.

'You refused my hand,' he said, 'although you are mine. I bought the Ray for eight hundred pounds.' Then turning to the young man with sullenness, he asked, 'George De Witt, what brings you here?'

'Why, cousin, I've a right to be here as well as you.'

'No, you have not. I have bought the Ray, and no man sets foot on this island against my will.'

The young man laughed good-humouredly.

'You won't keep me off your property then, Elijah, so long as Glory is here?'

Elijah made a motion as though he would speak angrily, but restrained himself with an effort. He said nothing, but his eyes followed every movement of Mehalah Sharland. She turned to him with an exultant splendour in her face, and pointing to the canvas bag on the table, said, 'There is the money. Will you take the rent at once, or wait till it is due.'

'It is not due till next Thursday.'

'We do not pay for a few weeks. Three weeks' grace we have been hitherto allowed.'

'I give no grace.'

'Then take your money at once.'

'I will not touch it till it is due. I will take it next Thursday. You will bring it me then to Red Hall.'

'Is the boat all right where I left her?' asked the young man.

'Yes, George!' answered the girl, 'she is on the hard where you anchored her this morning.

What have you been getting in Colchester to-day?'

'I have bought some groceries for mother,' he said, 'and there is a present with me for you. But that I will not give up till by-and-bye. You will help me to thrust the boat off, will you not, Glory?'

'She is afloat now. However, I will come presently, I must give Abraham first his supper.'

'Thank ye,' said the old man. 'George de Witt and me stopped at the Rose and had a bite. I must go at once after the cows. You'll excuse me.' He went out.

'Will you stay and sup with us, George?' asked the widow. 'There is something in the pot will be ready directly.'

'Thank you all the same,' he replied, 'I want to be back as soon as I can, the night will be dark; besides you and Glory have company.' Then turning to Rebow he added:

'So you have bought the Ray.'

'I have.'

'Then Glory and her mother are your tenants.'

'They are mine.'

'I hope they will find you an easy landlord.'

'I reckon they will not,' said Elijah shortly.

'Come along, Glory!' he called, abandoning the topic and the uncongenial speaker, and turning to the girl. 'Help me with my boat.'

'Don't be gone for long, Mehalah!' said her mother.

'I shall be back directly.'

Elijah Rebow kept his mouth closed. His face was as though cast in iron, but a living fire smouldered within and broke out through the eye-sockets, as lava will lie hard and cold, a rocky crust with a fiery fluid core within that at intervals glares out at fissures. He did not utter a word, but he watched Glory go out with De Witt, and then a grim smile curdled his rugged cheeks. He seated himself opposite the widow, and spread his great hands over the fire. He was pondering. The shadow of his strongly featured face and expanded hands was cast on the opposite wall, as the flame flickered, the shadow hands seemed to open and shut, to stretch and grasp.

The gold had died out of the sky and only a pearly twilight crept in at the window, the evening heaven seen through the pane was soft and cool in tone as the tints of the Glaucus gull. The old woman remained silent. She was afraid of

the new landlord. She had long known him, longer known of him, she had never liked him, and she liked less to have him now in a place of power over her.

Presently Rebow rose, slowly, from his seat, and laying aside his gun said, 'I too have brought a present, but not for Glory. She must know nothing of this, it is for you. I put the keg outside the door under the whitethorn. I knew a drop of spirits was good for the ague. We get spirits cheap, or I would not give you any.' He was unable to do a gracious act without marring its merit by an ungracious word. 'I will fetch it in. May it comfort you in the chills.'

He went out of the house and returned with a little keg under his arm. 'Where is it to go?' he asked.

'Oh, Master Rebow! this is good of you, and I am thankful. My ague does pull me down sorely.'

'Damn your ague, who cares about it!' he said surlily. 'Where is the keg to go?'

'Let me roll it in,' said the old woman jumping up. 'There are better cellars and storeplaces here than anywhere between this and Tiptree Heath.'

'Saving mine at Red Hall, and those at Salcot Rising Sun,' interjected the man.

'You see, Rebow, in times gone by, a great many smuggled goods were stowed away here; but much does not come this way now,' with a sigh.

'It goes to Red Hall instead,' said Rebow. 'Ah! if you were there, your life would be a merry one. There! take the keg. I have had trouble enough bringing it here. You stow it away where you like, yourself; and draw me a glass, I am dry.'

He flung himself in the chair again, and let the old woman take up and hug the keg, and carry it off to some secure hiding-place where in days gone by many much larger barrels of brandy and wine had been stored away. She soon returned.

'I have not tapped this,' she said. 'The liquor will be muddy. I have drawn a little from the other that you gave me.'

Elijah took the glass from her hand and tossed it off. He was chuckling to himself.

'You will say a word for me to Glory.'

'Rely on me, Elijah. None has been so good to me as you. None has given me anything for

my chill but you. But Mehalah will find it out, I reckon ; she suspects already.'

He paid no heed to her words.

'So she is not mine, nor the house, nor the marshes, nor the saltings, nor the fish and fowl!' he muttered derisively to himself.

'I paid eight hundred pounds for the Ray and all that therein is,' he continued, 'let alone what I paid the lawyer.' He rubbed his hands. Then he rose again, and took his gun.

'I'm off,' he said, and strode to the door.

At the same moment Mehalah appeared at it, her face clear and smiling. She looked handsomer than ever.

'Well!' snarled Rebow, arresting her, 'what did he give you?'

'That is no concern of yours,' answered the girl, and she tried to pass. He put his fowling piece across the door and barred the way.

'What did he give you?' he asked in his dogged manner.

'I might refuse to answer,' she said carelessly, 'but I do not mind your knowing ; the whole Ray and Mersea, and the world outside may know. This!' She produced an Indian red silk kerchief which she flung over her shoulders and

knotted under her chin. With her rich complexion, hazel eyes, dark hair and scarlet cap, lit by the red fire flames, she looked a gipsy, and splendid in her beauty. Rebow dropped his gun, thrust her aside with a sort of mad fury, and flung himself out of the door.

'He is gone at last!' said the girl with a gay laugh.

Rebow put his head in again. His lips were drawn back and his white teeth glistened.

'You will pay the rent next Thursday. I give no grace.'

Then he shut the door and was gone.

CHAPTER II.

THE RHYN.

'MOTHER,' said Mehalah, 'are you better now?'

'Yes, the fit is off me, but I am left terribly weak.'

'Mother, will you give me the medal?'

'What? Your grandmother's charm? You cannot want it!'

'It brings luck, and saves from sudden death. I wish to give it to George.'

'No, Mehalah! This will not do. You must keep it yourself.'

'It is mine, is it not?'

'No, child; it is promised you, but is not yours yet. You shall have it some future day.'

'I want it at once, that I may give it to George. He has made me a present of this red kerchief for my neck, and he has given me many another remembrance, but I have made him no return. I have nothing that I can give him save that medal. Let me have it.'

'It must not go out of the family, Mehalah.'

'It will not. You know what is between George and me.'

The old woman hesitated and excused herself, but was so much in the habit of yielding to her daughter, that she was unable in this matter to maintain her opposition. She submitted reluctantly, and crept out of the room to fetch the article demanded of her.

When she returned, she found Mehalah standing before the fire with her back to the embers, and her hands knitted behind her, looking at the floor, lost in thought.

'There it is,' grumbled the old woman. 'But I don't like to part with it; and it must not go out of the family. Keep it yourself, Mehalah, and give it away to none.'

The girl took the coin. It was a large silver token, the size of a crown, bearing on the face a figure of Mars in armour, with shield and brandished sword, between the zodiacal signs of the Ram and the Scorpion.

The reverse was gilt, and represented a square divided into five and twenty smaller squares, each containing a number, so that the sum in each row, taken either vertically or horizontally, was

sixty-five. The medal was undoubtedly foreign. Theophrastus Paracelsus, in his 'Archidoxa,' published in the year 1572, describes some such talisman, gives instructions for its casting, and says: 'This seal or token gives him who carries it about him strength and security and victory in all battles, protection in all perils. It enables him to overcome his enemies and counteract their plots.'

The medal held by the girl belonged to the sixteenth century. Neither she nor her mother had ever heard of Paracelsus, and knew nothing of his 'Archidoxa.' The figures on the face passed their comprehension. The mystery of the square on the reverse had never been discovered by them. They knew only that the token was a charm, and that family tradition held it to secure the wearer against sudden death by violence.

A hole was drilled through the piece, and a strong silver ring inserted. A broad silk riband of faded blue passed through the ring, so that the medal might be worn about the neck. For a few moments Mehalah studied the mysterious figures by the fire-light, then flung the riband round her neck, and hid the coin and its perplexing symbols in her bosom.

'I must light a candle,' she said; then she

stopped by the table on her way across the room, and took up the glass upon it.

'Mother,' she said sharply; 'who has been drinking here?'

The old woman pretended not to hear the question, and began to poke the fire.

'Mother, has Elijah Rebow been drinking spirits out of this glass?'

'To be sure, Mehalah, he did just take a drop.'

'Whence did he get it?'

'Don't you think it probable that such a man as he, out much on the marshes, should carry a bottle about with him? Most men go provided against the chill who can afford to do so.'

'Mother,' said the girl impatiently, 'you are deceiving me. I know he got the spirits here, and that you have had them here for some time. I insist on being told how you came by them.'

The old woman made feeble and futile attempts to evade answering her daughter directly; but was at last forced to confess that on two occasions, of which this evening was one, Elijah Rebow had brought her a small keg of rum.

'You do not grudge it me, Mehalah, do you? It does me good when I am low after my fits.'

'I do not grudge it you,' answered the girl;

'but I do not choose you should receive favours from that man. He has to-day been threatening us, and yet secretly he is making you presents. Why does he come here?' She looked full in her mother's face. 'Why does he give you these spirits? He a man who never did a good action but asked a return in fourfold measure. I promise you, mother, if he brings here any more, that I will stave in the cask and let the liquor you so value waste away.'

The widow made piteous protest, but her daughter remained firm.

'Now,' said the girl, 'this point is settled between us. Be sure I will not go back from my word. I will in nothing be behoven to the man I abhor. Now let me count the money.' She caught up the bag, then put it down again. She lit a candle at the hearth, drew her chair to the table, seated herself at it, untied the string knotted about the neck of the pouch, and poured the contents upon the board.

She sprang to her feet with a cry; she stood as though petrified, with one hand to her head, the other holding the bag. Her eyes, wide open with dismay, were fixed on the little heap she had emptied on the table—a heap of shot, great and small, some pennypieces, and a few bullets.

'What is the matter with you, Mehalah? What has happened?'

The girl was speechless. The old woman moved to the table and looked.

'What is this, Mehalah?'

'Look here! Lead, not gold.'

'There has been a mistake,' said the widow, nervously, 'call Abraham; he has given you the wrong sack.'

'There has been no mistake. This is the right bag. He had no other. We have been robbed.'

The old woman was about to put her hand on the heap, but Mehalah arrested it.

'Do not touch anything here,' she said, 'let all remain as it is till I bring Abraham. I must ascertain who has robbed us.'

She leaned her elbows on the table; she platted her fingers over her brow, and sat thinking. What could have become of the money? Where could it have been withdrawn? Who could have been the thief?

Abraham Dowsing, the shepherd, was a simple surly old man, honest but not intelligent, selfish but trustworthy. He was a fair specimen of the East Saxon peasant, a man of small reasoning power, moving like a machine, very slow, muddy

in mind, only slightly advanced in the scale of beings above the dumb beasts; with instinct just awaking into intelligence, but not sufficiently awake to know its powers; more unhappy and helpless than the brute, for instinct is exhausted in the transformation process; not happy as a man, for he is encumbered with the new gift, not illumined and assisted by it. He is distrustful of its power, inapt to appreciate it, detesting the exercise of it.

On the fidelity of Abraham Dowsing, Mehalah felt assured she might rely. He was guiltless of the abstraction. She relied on him to sell the sheep to the best advantage, for like everyone of low mental organisation, he was grasping and keen to drive a bargain. But when he had the money she knew that less confidence could be reposed on him. He could think of but one thing at a time, and if he fell into company, his mind would be occupied by his jug of beer, his bread and cheese, or his companion. He would not have attention at command for anything beside.

The rustic brain has neither agility nor flexibility. It cannot shift its focus nor change its point of sight. The educated mind will peer through a needlehole in a sheet of paper, and see through it the entire horizon and all the sky. The

uncultured mind perceives nothing but a hole, a hole everywhere without bottom, to be recoiled from, not sounded. When the oyster spat falls on mud in a tidal estuary, it gets buried in mud deeper with every tide, two films each twenty-four hours, and becomes a fossil if it becomes anything. Mind in the rustic is like oyster spat, unformed, the protoplasm of mind but not mind itself, daily, annually deeper buried in the mud of coarse routine. It never thinks, it scarce lives, and dies in unconsciousness that it ever possessed life.

Mehalah sat considering, her mother by her, with anxious eyes fastened on her daughter's face.

The money must have been abstracted either in Colchester or on the way home. The old man had said that he stopped and tarried at the Rose inn on the way. Had the theft been there committed? Who had been his associates in that tavern?

'Mother,' said Mehalah suddenly, 'has the canvas bag been on the table untouched since Abraham brought it here?'

'To be sure it has.'

'You have been in the room, in your seat all the while?'

'Of course I have. There was no one

here but Rebow. You do not suspect him, do you?'

Mehalah shook her head.

'No, I have no reason to do so. You were here all the while?'

'Yes.'

Mehalah dropped her brow again on her hands. What was to be done? It was in vain to question Abraham. His thick and addled brain would baffle enquiry. Like a savage, the peasant when questioned will equivocate, and rather than speak the truth invent a lie from a dim fear lest the truth should hurt him. The lie is to him what his shell is to the snail, his place of natural refuge; he retreats to it not only from danger, but from observation.

He does not desire to mislead the querist, but to baffle observation. He accumulates deception, equivocation, falsehood about him just as he allows dirt to clot his person, for his own warmth and comfort, not to offend others.

The girl stood up.

'Mother, I must go after George De Witt at once. He was with Abraham on the road home, and he will tell us the truth. It is of no use questioning the old man, he will grow suspicious,

and think we are accusing him. The tide is at flood, I shall be able to catch George on the Mersea hard.'

'Take the lanthorn with you.'

'I will. The evening is becoming dark, and there will be ebb as I come back. I must land in the saltings.'

Mehalah unhung a lanthorn from the ceiling and kindled a candle end in it, at the light upon the table. She opened the drawer of the table and took out a pistol. She looked at the priming, and then thrust it through a leather belt she wore under her guernsey.

On that coast, haunted by smugglers and other lawless characters, a girl might well go armed. By the roadside to Colchester where cross ways met, was growing an oak that had been planted as an acorn in the mouth of a pirate of Rowhedge, not many years before, who had there been hung in chains for men murdered and maids carried off. Nearly every man carried a gun in hopes of bringing home wild fowl, and when Mehalah was in her boat, she usually took her gun with her for the same purpose. But men bore firearms not only for the sake of bringing home game; self-protection demanded it.

At this period, the mouth of the Blackwater was a great centre of the smuggling trade; the number and intricacy of the channels made it a safe harbour for those who lived on contraband traffic. It was easy for those who knew the creeks to elude the revenue boats, and every farm and tavern was ready to give cellarage to run goods and harbour to smugglers.

Between Mersea and the Blackwater were several flat holms or islands, some under water at high-tides, others only just standing above it, and between these the winding waterways formed a labyrinth in which it was easy to evade pursuit and entangle the pursuers. The traffic was therefore here carried on with an audacity and openness scarce paralleled elsewhere. Although there was a coastguard station at the mouth of the estuary, on Mersea 'Hard,' yet goods were run even in open day under the very eyes of the revenue men. Each public-house on the island, and on the mainland near a creek obtained its entire supply of wine and spirits from contraband vessels. Whether the coastguard were bought to shut their eyes or were baffled by the adroitness of the smugglers, cannot be said, but certain it was, that the taverns found no difficulty in obtain-

ing their supplies as often and as abundant as they desired.

The villages of Virley and Salcot were the chief landing-places, and there horses and donkeys were kept in large numbers for the conveyance of the spirits, wine, tobacco and silk to Tiptree Heath, the scene of Boadicæa's great battle with the legions of Suetonius, which was the emporium of the trade. There a constant fair or auction of contraband articles went on, and thence they were distributed to Maldon, Colchester, Chelmsford, and even London. Tiptree Heath was a permanent camping ground of gipsies, and squatters ran up there rude hovels; these were all engaged in the distribution of the goods brought from the sea.

But though the taverns were able to supply themselves with illicit spirits, unchecked, the coastguard were ready to arrest and detain run goods not destined for their cellars. Deeds of violence were not rare, and many a revenue officer fell a victim to his zeal. On Sunken Island off Mersea, the story went, that a whole boat's crew were found with their throats cut, they were transported thence to the churchyard,

there buried, and their boat turned keel upwards over them.

The gipsies were thought to pursue over-conscientious and successful officers on the mainland, and remove them with a bullet should they escape the smugglers on the water.

The whole population of this region was more or less mixed up with, and interested in, this illicit traffic, and with defiance of the officers of the law, from the parson who allowed his nag and cart to be taken from his stable at night, left unbolted for the purpose, and received a keg now and then as repayment, to the vagabonds who dealt at the door far inland in silks and tobacco obtained free of duty on the coast.

What was rare elsewhere was by no means uncommon here, gipsies intermarried with the people, and settled on the coast. The life of adventure, danger, and impermanence was sufficiently attractive to them to induce them to abandon for it their roving habits; perhaps the difference of life was not so marked as to make the change distasteful. Thus a strain of wild, restless, law-defying gipsy blood entered the veins of the Essex marshland populations, and galvanised into new life the sluggish and slimy liquid that trickled

through the East Saxon arteries. Adventurers from the Low Countries, from France, even from Italy and Spain—originally smugglers, settled on the coast, generally as publicans, in league with the owners of the contraband vessels, married and left issue. There were neither landed gentry nor resident incumbents in this district, to civilise and restrain. The land was held by yeomen farmers, and by squatters who had seized on and enclosed waste land, no man saying them nay. At the revocation of the Edict of Nantes a large number of Huguenot French families had settled in the 'Hundreds' and the marshes, and for full a century in several of the churches divine service was performed alternately in French and English. To the energy of these colonists perhaps are due the long extended sea-walls enclosing vast tracts of pasture from the tide.

Those Huguenots not only infused their Gallic blood into the veins of the people, but also their Puritanic bitterness and Calvinistic partiality for Old Testament names. Thus the most frequent Christian names met with are those of patriarchs, prophets and Judaic kings, and the sire-names are foreign, often greatly corrupted.

Yet, in spite of this infusion of strange ichor

from all sides, the agricultural peasant on the land remains unaltered, stamped out of the old unleavened dough of Saxon stolidity, forming a class apart from that of the farmers and that of the seamen, in intelligence, temperament, and gravitation. All he has derived from the French element which has washed about him has been a nasal twang in his pronunciation of English. Yet his dogged adherence to one letter, which was jeopardised by the Gallic invasion, has reacted, and imposed on the invaders, and the *v* is universally replaced on the Essex coast by a *w*.

In the plaster and oak cottages away from the sea, by stagnant pools, the hatching places of clouds of mosquitos, whence rises with the night the haunting spirit of tertian ague, the hag that rides on, and takes the life out of the sturdiest men and women, and shakes and wastes the vital nerves of the children, live the old East Saxon slow-moving, never thinking, day labourers. In the tarred wreck-timber cabins by the sea just above the reach of the tide, beside the shingle beach, swarms a yeasty, turbulent, race of mixed-breeds, engaged in the fishery and in the contraband trade.

Mehalah went to the boat. It was floating. She placed the lanthorn in the bows, cast loose,

and began to row. She would need the light on her return, perhaps, as with the falling tide she would be unable to reach the landing-place under the farmhouse, and be forced to anchor at the end of the island, and walk home across the saltings. To cross these without a light on a dark night is not safe even to one knowing the lie of the land.

A little light still lingered in the sky. There was a yellow grey glow in the west over the Bradwell shore. Its fringe of trees, and old barn chapel standing across the walls of the buried city Othona, stood sombre against the light, as though dabbed in pitch on a faded golden ground. The water was still, as no wind was blowing, and it reflected the sky and the stars that stole out, with such distinctness that the boat seemed to be swimming in the sky, among black tatters of clouds, these being the streaks of land that broke the horizon and the reflection.

Gulls were screaming, and curlew uttered their mournful cry. Mehalah rowed swiftly down the Rhyn, as the channel was called that divided the Ray from the mainland, and that led to the 'hard' by the Rose Inn, and formed the high-

way by which it drew its supplies, and from which every farm in the parish of Peldon carried its casks of strong liquor. To the west extended a vast marsh from which the tide was excluded by a dyke many miles in length. Against the northern horizon rose the hill of Wigborough crowned by a church and a great tumulus, and some trees that served as landmarks to the vessels entering the Blackwater. In ancient days the hill had been a beacon station, and it was reconverted to this purpose in time of war. A man was placed by order of Government in the tower, to light a crescet on the summit, in answer to a similar beacon at Mersea, in the event of a hostile fleet being seen in the offing.

Now and then the boat—it was a flat-bottomed punt—hissed among the asters, as Mehalah shot over tracts usually dry, but now submerged; she skirted next a bed of bullrushes. These reeds are only patient of occasional flushes with salt water, and where they grow it is at the opening of a land drain, or mark a fresh spring. Suddenly as she was cutting the flood, the punt was jarred and arrested. She looked round. A boat was across her bows. It had shot out of the rushes and stopped her.

'Whither are you going, Glory?'

The voice was that of Elijah Rebow, the last man Mehalah wished to meet at night, when alone on the water.

'That is my affair, not yours,' she answered. 'I am in haste, let me pass.'

'I will not. I will not be treated like this, Glory. I have shot you a couple of curlew, and here they are.'

He flung the birds into her boat. Mehalah threw them back again.

'Let it be an understood thing between us, Elijah, that we will accept none of your presents. You have brought my mother a keg of rum, and I have sworn to beat in the head of the next you give her. She will take nothing from you.'

'There you are mistaken, Glory; she will take as much as I will give her. You mean that you will not. I understand your pride, Glory! and I love you for it.'

'I care nothing for your love or your hate. We are naught to each other.'

'Yes we are, I am your landlord. We shall see how that sentiment of yours will stand next Thursday.'

'What do you mean?' asked Mehalah hastily.

'What do I mean? Why, I suppose I am intelligible enough in what I say for you to understand me without explanation. When you come to pay the rent to me next Thursday, you will not be able to say we are naught to each other. Why! you will have to pay me for every privilege of life you enjoy, for the house you occupy, for the marshes that feed your cow and swell its udder with milk, for the saltings on which your sheep fatten and grow their wool.'

The brave girl's heart failed for a moment. She had not the money. What would Elijah say and do when he discovered that she and her mother were defaulters? However, she put a bold face on the matter now, and thrusting off the boat with her oar, she said impatiently, 'You are causing me to waste precious time. I must be back before the water is out of the fleets.'

'Whither are you going?' again asked Rebow, and again he drove his boat athwart her bows. 'It is not safe for a young girl like you to be about on the water after nightfall with ruffians of all sorts poaching on my saltings and up and down my creeks.'

'I am going to Mersea City,' said Mehalah.

'You are going to George De Witt.'

'What if I am? That is no concern of yours.'

'He is my cousin.'

'I wish he were a cousin very far removed from you.'

'Oh Glory! you are jesting.' He caught the side of the punt with his hand, for she made an effort to push past him. 'I shall not detain you long. Take these curlew. They are plump birds; your mother will relish them. Take them, and be damned to your pride. I shot them for you.'

'I will not have them, Elijah.'

'Then I will not either,' and he flung the dead birds into the water.

She seized the opportunity, and dipping her oars in the tide, strained at them, and shot away. She heard him curse, for his boat had grounded and he could not follow.

She laughed in reply.

In twenty minutes Mehalah ran her punt on Mersea beach. Here a little above highwater mark stood a cluster of wooden houses and an old inn, pretentiously called the 'City,' a hive of smugglers. On the shore, somewhat East, and away from the City, lay a dismasted vessel, fastened upright by chains, the keel sunk in the

shingle. She had been carried to this point at spring flood and stranded, and was touched, not lifted by the ordinary tides. Mehalah's punt, drawing no draught, floated under the side of this vessel, and she caught the ladder by which access was obtained to the deck.

'Who is there?' asked George De Witt looking over the side.

'I am come after you, George,' answered Mehalah.

'Why, Glory! what is the matter?'

'There is something very serious the matter. You must come back with me at once to the Ray.'

'Is your mother ill?'

'Worse than that.'

'Dead?'

'No, no! nothing of that sort. She is all right. But I cannot explain the circumstances now. Come at once and with me.'

'I will get the boat out directly.'

'Never mind the boat. Come in the punt with me. You cannot return by water to-night. The ebb will prevent that. You will be obliged to go round by the Strood. Tell your mother not to expect you.'

'But what is the matter, Glory?'

'I will tell you when we are afloat.'

'I shall be back directly, but I do not know how the old woman will take it.' He swung himself down into the cabin, and announced to his mother that he was going to the Ray, and would return on foot by the Strood.

A gurgle of objurgations rose from the hatchway, and followed the young man as he made his escape.

'I wouldn't have doneit for another,' said he; 'the old lady is put out, and will not forgive me. It will be bad walking by the Strood, Glory! Can't you put me across to the Fresh Marsh?'

'If there is water enough I will do so. Be quick now. There is no time to spare.'

He came down the ladder and stepped into the punt.

'Give me the oars, Glory. You sit in the stern and take the lanthorn.'

'It is in the bows.'

'I know that. But can you not understand, Glory, that when I am rowing, I like to see you. Hold the lanthorn so that I may get a peep of your face now and then.'

'Do not be foolish, George,' said Mehalah.

However, she did as he asked, and the yellow dull light fell on her face, red handkerchief and cap.

'You look like a witch,' laughed De Witt.

'I will steer, row as hard as you can, George,' said the girl; then abruptly she exclaimed, 'I have something for you. Take it now, and look at it afterwards.'

She drew the medal from her bosom, and passing the riband over her head, leaned forward, and tossed the loop across his shoulders.

'Don't upset the boat, Glory! Sit still; a punt is an unsteady vessel, and won't bear dancing in. What is it that you have given me?'

'A keepsake.'

'I shall always keep it, Glory, for the sake of the girl I love best in the world. Now tell me; am I to row up Mersea channel or the Rhyn?'

'There is water enough in the Rhyn, though we shall not be able to reach our hard. You row on, and do not trouble yourself about the direction, I will steer. We shall land on the Saltings. That is why I have brought the lanthorn with me.'

'What are you doing with the light?'

'I must put it behind me. With the blaze in my eyes I cannot see where to steer.' She did as she said.

'Now tell me, Glory, what you have hung round my neck.'

'It is a medal, George.'

'Whatever it be, it comes from you, and is worth more than gold.'

'It is worth a great deal. It is a certain charm.'

'Indeed!'

'It preserves him who wears it from death by violence.'

At the word a flash shot out of the rushes, and a bullet whizzed past the stern.

George De Witt paused on his oars, startled, confounded.

'The bullet was meant for you or me,' said Mehalah in a low voice. 'Had the lanthorn been in the bows and not in the stern it would have struck you.'

Then she sprang up, and held the lanthorn aloft, above her head.

'Coward, whoever you are, skulking in the reeds. Show a light, if you are a man. Show a light as I do, and give me a mark in return.'

'For heaven's sake, Glory, put out the candle,' exclaimed De Witt in agitation.

'Coward! show a light, that I may have a shot at you,' she cried again, without noticing what George said. In his alarm for her and for himself, he raised his oar and dashed the lanthorn out of her hand. It fell, and went out in the water.

Mehalah drew her pistol from her belt, and cocked it. She was standing, without trembling, immovable in the punt, her eye fixed unflinching on the reeds.

'George,' she said, 'dip the oars. Don't let her float away.'

He hesitated.

Presently a slight click was audible, then a feeble flash, as from flint struck with steel in the pitch blackness of the shore.

Then a small red spark burned steadily.

Not a sound, save the ripple of the retreating tide.

Mehalah's pistol was levelled at the spark. She fired, and the spark disappeared.

She and George held their breath.

'I have hit,' she said. 'Now run the punt in where the light was visible.'

'No, Glory! this will not do. I am not going to run you and myself into fresh danger.' He struck out.

'George! You are rowing away. Give me the oars. I will find out who it was that fired at us.'

'This is foolhardiness,' he said, but obeyed. A couple of strokes ran the punt among the reeds. Nothing was to be seen or heard. The night was dark on the water, it was black as ink among the rushes. Several times De Witt stayed his hand and listened, but there was not a sound save the gurgle of the water, and the song of the night wind among the tassels and harsh leaves of the bullrushes.

'She is aground,' said De Witt.

'We must back into the channel, and push on to the Ray,' said Mehalah.

The young man jumped into the water among the roots of the reeds, and drew the punt out till she floated, then he stepped in and resumed the oars.

'Hist!' whispered De Witt.

Both heard the click of a lock.

'Down!' he whispered, and threw himself in the bottom of the punt.

Another flash, report, and a bullet struck and splintered the bulwark.

De Witt rose, resumed the oars, and rowed lustily.

Mehalah had not stirred. She had remained erect in the stern and never flinched.

'Coward!' she cried in a voice full of wrath and scorn, 'I defy you to death, be you who you may!'

CHAPTER III.

THE SEVEN WHISTLERS.

THE examination of old Abraham before George De Witt did not lead to any satisfactory result. The young man was unable to throw light on the mystery. He had not been with the shepherd all the while since the sale of the sheep; nor had he seen the money. Abraham had indeed told him the sum for which he had parted with the flock, and in so doing had chinked the bag significantly. George thought it was impossible for the shot and pennypieces that had been found in the pouch to have produced the metallic sound he had heard. Abraham had informed him of the sale in Colchester. Then they had separated, and the shepherd had left the town before De Witt.

The young man had overtaken him at the public-house called the Red Lion at Abberton, half-way between Colchester and his destination. He was drinking a mug of beer with some sea-

faring men; and they proceeded thence together. But at the Rose, another tavern a few miles further, they had stopped for a glass and something to eat. But even there De Witt had not been with the old man all the while, for the landlord had called him out to look at a contrivance he had in his punt for putting a false keel on her; with a bar, after a fashion he had seen among the South Sea Islanders when he was a sailor.

The discussion of this daring innovation had lasted some time, and when De Witt returned to the tavern, he found Abraham dozing, if not fast asleep, with his head on the table, and his money bag in his hand.

'It is clear enough,' said the widow, 'that the money was stolen either at the Lion or at the Rose.'

'I brought the money safe here,' said Abraham sullenly. 'It is of no use your asking questions, and troubling my head about what I did here and there. I was at the Woolpack at Colchester, at the Lion at Abberton, and lastly at the Rose. But I tell you I brought the money here all safe, and laid it there on that table every penny.'

'How can you be sure of that, Abraham?'

'I say I know it.'

'But Abraham, what grounds have you for such assurance?' Did you count the money at the Rose?'

'I don't care what you may ask or say. I brought the money here. If you have lost it, or it has been bewitched since then, I am not to blame.'

'Abraham, it must have been stolen on the road. There was no one here to take the money.'

'That is nothing to me. I say I laid the money all right there!' he pointed to the table.

'You may go, Abraham,' said Mehalah.

'Do you charge me with taking the money?' the old man asked with moody temper.

'Of course not,' answered the girl. 'We did not suspect you for one moment.'

'Then whom do you lay it on?'

'We suspect some one whom you met at one of the taverns.'

'I tell you,' he said with an oath, 'I brought the money here.'

'You cannot prove it,' said De Witt; 'if you have any reasons for saying this, let us hear them.'

'I have no reasons,' answered the shepherd 'but I know the truth all the ame. I never have

reasons, I do not want to have them, when I know a fact.'

'Did you shake the bag and make the money chink on the way?'

'I will not answer any more questions. If you suspect me to be the thief, say so to my face, and don't go ferriting and trapping to ketch me, and then go and lay it on me before a magistrate.'

'You had better go, Abraham. No one disputes your perfect honesty,' said Mehalah.

'But I will not go, if anyone suspects me.'

'We do not suspect you.'

'Then why do you ask questions? Who asks questions who don't want to lay a wickedness on one?'

'Go off to bed, Abraham,' said widow Sharland. 'We have met with a dreadful loss, and the Almighty knows how we are to come out of it.'

The old man went forth grumbling imprecations on himself if he answered any more questions.

'Well,' asked Mehalah of De Witt, when the shepherd was gone, 'what do you think has become of the money?'

'I suppose he was robbed at one of the

taverns. I see no other possible way of accounting for the loss. The bag was not touched on the table from the moment Abraham set it down till you opened it.'

'No. My mother was here all the time. There was no one else in the room but Elijah Rebow.'

'He is out of the question,' said De Witt.

'Besides, my mother never left her seat whilst he was here. Did you, mother?'

The old woman shook her head.

'What are we to do?' she asked; 'we have no money now for the rent; and that must be paid next Thursday.'

'Have you none at all?'

'None but a trifle which we need for purchases against the winter. There was more in the bag than was needed for the rent, and how we shall struggle through the winter without it, heaven alone can tell.'

'You have no more sheep to sell?'

'None but ewes, which cannot be parted with.'

'Nor a cow?'

'It would be impossible for us to spare her.'

'Then I will lend you the money,' said George. 'I have something laid by, and you shall have

what you need for the rent out of it. Mehalah will repay me some day.'

'I will, George! I will!' said the girl vehemently, and her eyes filled. She took the two hands of her lover in her own, and looked him full in the face. Her eyes expressed the depth of her gratitude which her tongue could not utter.

'Now that is settled,' said De Witt, 'let us talk of something else.'

'Come along, George,' said Mehalah, hastily, interrupting him. 'If you want to be put across on Fresh Marsh, you must not stay talking here any longer.'

'All right, Glory! I am ready to go with you, anywhere, to the world's end.'

As she drew him outside, she whispered, 'I was afraid of your speaking about the two shots to-night. I do not wish my mother to hear of that; it would alarm her.'

'But I want to talk to you about them,' said De Witt. 'Have you any notion who it was that fired at us?'

'Have you?' asked Mehalah evading an answer.

'I have a sort of a notion.'

'So have I. As I was going down the Rhyn to fetch you, I was stopped by Elijah Rebow.'

'Well, what did he want?'

'He wanted me to take some curlew he had shot; but that was not all, he tried to prevent my going on. He said that I ought not to be on the water at night alone.'

'He was right. He knew a thing or two.'

'He did not like my going to Mersea—to you.'

'I dare say not. He knew what was in the wind.'

'What do you mean, George?'

'He tried to prevent your going on?'

'Yes, he did, more than once.'

'Then he is in it. I don't like Elijah, but I did not think so badly of him as that.'

'What do you mean, George?'

As they talked they walked down the meadow to the saltings. They were obliged to go slowly and cautiously. The tide had fallen rapidly, and left the pools brimming. Every runnel was full of water racing out with the rush of a mill stream. 'You see, Glory, the new captain of the coast-guard has been giving a deal of trouble lately. He has noticed the signal-flashing from the

Leather Bottle at the city, and has guessed or found out the key; so he has been down there flashing false signals with a lanthorn. By this means he has brought some of the smugglers very neatly into traps he has laid for them. They are as mad as devils, they swear he is taking an unfair advantage of them, and that they will have his life for it. That is what I have heard whispered; and I hear a great many things.'

'Oh George! have you not warned him?'

'I! my dear Glory! what can I do? He knows he is in danger as well as I. It is a battle between them, and it don't do for a third party to step between. That is what we have done to-night, and near got knocked over for doing it. Captain Macpherson is about, night and day. There never was a fellow more wide awake, at least not on this station. What do you think he did the other day? A vessel came in, and he overhauled her, but found nothing; he sought for some barrels drawn along attached behind her, below water level, but couldn't find them. As he was leaving, he just looked up at the tackling. "Haloo!" said he to the captain, "your cordage is begun to untwist, suppose I have your old ropes and give you new?" He sent a man aloft, and all

the ropes were made of twisted tobacco. Now, as you may suppose, the smugglers don't much like such a man.'

'But George, he would hardly go about at night with a lanthorn in his boat.'

'That is what he does—only it is a dark lanthorn, and with it he flashes his signals. That is what makes the men so mad. It is not my doctrine to shoot a man who does his duty. If a man is a smuggler let him do his duty as one. If he is a coast-guard, let him do his duty by the revenue.'

'But, George! if he were out watching for smugglers, he would not have carried his light openly.'

'He might have thought all was safe in the Rhyn.'

'Then again,' pursued Mehalah, 'I spoke, and there was a second shot after that.'

'Whoever was there waiting for the captain may have thought you were a boy. I do not believe the shot was at you, but at me.'

'But I held the light up. It would have been seen that I was a woman.'

'Not a bit. All seen would be your cap and jersey, which are such as sailor boys wear.'

Mehalah shook her head thoughtfully and somewhat doubtfully, and paced by the side of De Witt. She did not speak for some time. She was not satisfied with his explanation, but she could not state her reasons for dissatisfaction.

Presently she said, 'Do you think that it was Rebow who fired?'

'No, of course I do not. He knew you were out, and with a light; and he knows your voice.'

'But you said he was in the plot.'

'I said that I supposed he knew about it; he knew that there were men out in punts waiting for the captain, he probably knew that there was some fellow lurking in the Rhyn; but I did not say that he would shoot the captain. I do not for a moment suppose he would. He is not greatly affected by his vigilance. He gets something out of the trade, but not enough to be of importance to him. A man of his means would not think it worth his while to shoot an officer.'

'Then you conjecture that he warned me, and went home.'

'That is most likely, I would have done the same; nay more, I would not have let you go on, if I knew there were fellows about this night with guns on the look-out. He did not dare to speak

plainly what he knew, but he gave you a broad hint, and his best advice, and I admire and respect him for it.'

'You and Rebow are cousins?'

'His father's sister is my mother. The land and money all went to Elijah's father who is now dead, and is now in Elijah's hands. My mother got nothing. The family were angry with her for marrying off the land on to the water. But you see at Red Hall she had lived, so to speak, half in and half out of the sea; she took to one element as readily as to the other.'

'I can trace little resemblance in your features, but something in your voice.'

'Now, Glory!' said the young man, 'here is the boat. How fast the tide ebbs here. She is already dry, and we must shove her down over the grass and mud till she floats. You step in, I will run her along.'

The wind had risen, and was wailing over the marshes, sighing among the harsh herbage, the sea-lavender, sovereign wood, and wild asparagus. Not a cloud was visible. The sky was absolutely unblurred and thick besprint with stars. Jupiter burned in the south, and cast a streak of silver over the ebbing waters.

The young people stood silent by each other for a moment, and their hearts beat fast. Other matters had broken in on and troubled the pleasant current of their love; but now the thought of these was swept aside, and their hearts rose and stretched towards each other. They had known each other for many years, and the friendship of childhood had insensibly ripened in their hearts to love.

'I have not properly thanked you, George, for the promise of help in our trouble.'

'Nor I, Mehalah, for the medal you have given me.'

'Promise me, George, to wear it ever. It saved your life to-night, I doubt not.'

'What! Does it save from death?'

'From sudden death,' answered Mehalah. 'I told you so before, in the boat.'

'I forgot about it, Glory.'

'I will tell you now all about it, my friend. The charm belonged to my mother's mother. She, as I daresay you have heard, was a gipsy. My grandfather fell in love with her and married her. He was a well-to-do man, owning a bit of land of his own; but he would go to law with a neighbour and lost it, and it went to the lawyer.

Well, my grandmother brought the charm with her, and it has been in the family ever since. It had been in the gipsy family of my grandmother time out of mind, and was lent about when any of the men went on dangerous missions. No one who wears it can die a sudden death from violence—that is'—Mehalah qualified the assertion, 'on land.'

'It does not preserve one on the water then?' said George, with an incredulous laugh.

'I won't say that. It surely did so to-night. It saves from shot and stab.'

'Not from drowning?'

'I think not.'

'I must get a child's caul, and then I shall be immortal.'

'Don't joke, George,' said Mehalah gravely. 'What I say is true.'

'Glory!' said De Witt, 'I always thought you looked like a gipsy with your dark skin and large brown eyes, and now from your own lips comes the confession that you are one.'

'There is none of the blood in my mother,' said she, 'she is like an ordinary Christian. I fancy it jumps a generation.'

'Well, then, you dear gipsy, here is my hand. Tell my fortune.'

'I cannot do that. But I have given you a gipsy charm against evil men and accidents.'

'Hark!'

Out of the clear heaven was heard plaintive whistles, loud, high up, inexpressibly weird and sad, 'Ewe! ewe! ewe!' They burst shrilly on the ears, then became fainter, then burst forth again, then faded away. It was as though spirits were passing in the heavens wailing about a brother sprite that had flickered into nothingness.

'The curlew are in flight. What is the matter, Mehalah?'

The girl was shivering.

'Are you cold!'

'George! those are the Seven Whistlers.'

'They are the long-beaked curlew going south.'

'They are the Seven Whistlers, and they mean death or deathlike woe. For God's sake, George,' she threw her arms round him, 'swear, swear to me, never to lay aside the medal I have given you, but to wear it night and day.'

'There! Glory, I swear it.'

CHAPTER IV.

RED HALL.

The rent-paying day was bright and breezy. The tide was up in the morning, and Mehalah and her mother in a boat with sail and jib and spritsail flew before a north-east wind down the Mersea Channel, and doubling Sunken Island, entered the creek which leads to Salcot and Virley, two villages divided only by a tidal stream, and connected by a bridge.

The water danced and sparkled, multitudes of birds were on wing, now dipping in the wavelets, now rising and shaking off the glittering drops. A high sea-wall hid the reclaimed land on their left. Behind it rose the gaunt black structure of a windmill used for pumping the water out of the dykes in the marsh. It was working now, the great black arms revolving in the breeze, and the pump creaking as if the engine groaned remonstrances at being called to

toil on such a bright day. A little further appeared a tiled roof above the wall.

'There is Red Hall,' said Mehalah, as she ran the boat ashore and threw out the anchor. 'I have brought the stool, mother,' she added, and helped the old woman to land dry-footed. The sails were furled, and then Mehalah and her mother climbed the wall and descended into the pastures. These were of considerable extent, reclaimed saltings, but of so old a date that the brine was gone from the soil, and they furnished the best feed for cattle anywhere round. Several stagnant canals or ditches intersected the flat tract and broke it into islands, but they hung together by the thread of sea-wall, and the windmill drained the ditches into the sea.

In the midst of the pasture stood a tall red-brick house. Tere was not a tree near it. It rose from the flat like a tower. The basement consisted of cellars above ground, and there were arched entrances to these from the two ends. They were lighted by two small round windows about four foot from the ground. A flight of brick stairs built over an arch led from a paved platform to the door of the house,

which stood some six feet above the level of the marsh. The house had perhaps been thus erected in view of a flood overleaping the walls, and converting the house for a while into an island, or as a preventive to the inhabitants against ague. The sea-walls had been so well kept that no tide had poured over them, and the vaults beneath served partly as cellars, and being extensive, were employed with the connivance of the owner as a store place for run spirits. The house was indeed very conveniently situated for contraband trade. A 'fleet' or tidal creek on either side of the marsh allowed of approach or escape by the one when the other was watched. Nor was this all. The marsh itself was penetrated by three or four ramifications of the two main channels, to these the sea-wall accommodated itself instead of striking across them, and there was water-way across the whole marsh, so that if a boat were lifted over the bank on one side, it could be rowed across, again lifted, and enter the other channel, before a pursuing boat would have time to return to and double the spit of land that divided the fleets. The windmill which stood on this spit was in no favour with the coastguard, for it was thought

to act the double purpose of pump and observatory. The channel south of these marshes, called the Tollesbury Fleet, was so full of banks and islets as to be difficult to navigate, and more than once a revenue boat had got entangled and grounded there, when in pursuit of a smuggled cargo, which the officers had every reason to believe was at that time being landed on the Red Hall marshes, and carted into Salcot and Virley with the farmer's horses.

The house was built completely of brick, the windows were of moulded brick, mullions and drip stone, and the roof was of tile. How the name of Red Hall came to be given it, was obvious at a glance.

Round the house was a yard paved with brick, and a moat filled with rushes and weed. There were a few low outhouses, stable, cowsheds, bakehouse, forming a yard at the back, and into that descended the stair from the kitchen-door over a flying arch, like that in front.

Perhaps the principal impression produced by the aspect of Red Hall on the visitor was its solitariness. The horizon was bounded by sea wall; only when the door was reached, which was on a level with the top of the mound, were

the glittering expanse of sea, the creeks, and the woods on Mersea Island and the mainland visible. Mehalah and her mother had never been at Red Hall before, and though they were pretty familiar with the loneliness of the marshes, the utter isolation of this tall gaunt house impressed them. The thorntrees at the Ray gave their farm an aspect of snugness compared with this. From the Ray, village-church towers and cultivated acres were visible, but so long as they were in the pasture near the Hall, nothing was to be seen save a flat tract of grass land intersected with lines of bullrush, and bounded by a mound.

Several cows and horses were in the pasture, but no human being was visible. Mehalah and her mother hesitated before ascending the stair.

'This is the queerest place for a Christian to live in I ever saw,' said the widow. 'Look there, Mehalah, there is a date on the door, sixteen hundred and thirty-six. Go up and knock.'

'Do you see that little window in the sea face of the house, mother?'

'Yes. There is none but it.'

'I can tell you what that is for. It is to signal from with a light.'

'I don't doubt it. Go on.'

Mehalah slowly ascended the stair; it was without a balustrade. She struck against the door. The door was of strong plank thickly covered with nails, and the date of which the widow had spoken was made with nail-heads at the top.

Her knock met with no response, so she thrust the door open and entered, followed by her mother.

The room she stepped into was large and low. It was lighted by but one window to the south, fitted with lead lattice. The floor was of brick, for the cellarage was vaulted and supported a solid basement. There was no ceiling, and the oak rafters were black with age and smoke. The only ornaments decorating the walls were guns and pistols, some of curious foreign make.

The fire-place was large; on the oak lintel was cut deep the inscription:—

'WHEN I HOLD (1636) I HOLD FAST.'

Mehalah had scarce time to notice all this, when a trap-door she had not observed in the floor flew up, and the head, then the shoulders, and finally the entire body, of Elijah Rebow emerged from the basement. Without taking

notice of his tenants, he leisurely ran a stout iron bolt through a staple, making fast the trap at the top, then he did the same with a bolt at the bottom.

At the time, this conduct struck Mehalah as singular. It was as though Rebow were barring a door from within lest he should be broken in on from the cellar.

Elijah slowly drew a leather armchair over the trap-door, and seated himself in it. The hole through which he had ascended was near the fire-place, and now that he sat over it he occupied the ingle nook.

'Well, Glory!' said he suddenly, addressing Mehalah. 'So you have *not* brought the rent. You have come with your old mother to blubber and beg compassion and delay. I know it all. It is of no use. Tears don't move me, I have no pity, and I grant no delay. I want my money. Every man does. He wants his money when it's due. I calculated on it, I've a debt which I shall wipe off with it, so there; now no excuses, I tell you they won't do. Sheer off.'

'Master Rebow—' began the widow.

'You may save your speech,' said Elijah, cutting her short. 'Faugh! when I've been

down there,'—he pointed with his thumb towards the cellar—'I need a smoke.' He drew forth a clay pipe and tobacco-box and leisurely filled the bowl. Whilst he was lighting his pipe at the hearth, where an old pile was smouldering, and emitting an odour like gunpowder, Mehalah drew a purse from her pocket and counted the amount of the rent on the table. Rebow did not observe her. He was engaged in making his pipe draw, and the table was behind the chair.

'Well!' said he, blowing a puff of smoke, and chuckling, 'I fancy you are in a pretty predicament. Read that over the fire, cut yonder, do you see? "When I hold, I hold fast." I didn't cut that, but my fore-elders did, and we all do that. Why, George De Witt's mother thought to have had some pickings out of the marsh, she did, but my father got hold of it, and he held fast. He did not let go a penny; no, not a farthing. It is a family characteristic. It is a family pleasure. We take a pride in it. I don't care what it is, whether it is a bit of land, or a piece of coin, or a girl, it is all the same, and I think you'll find it is so with me. Eh! Glory! When I hold, I hold fast.' He turned in his chair and leered at her.

'There, there,' said she, 'lay hold of your

rent, and hold fast till death. We want none of it.'

'What is that?' exclaimed Rebow, starting out of his seat. 'What money is that?'

'The rent,' said Mehalah; she stood erect beside the table in her haughty beauty, and laughed at the surprised and angry expression that clouded Rebow's countenance.

'I won't take it. You have stolen it.'

'Master Rebow,' put in the widow, 't he money is yours; it is the rent, not a penny short.'

'Where did you get the money?' he asked with a curse.

'You bid me bring the money on rent-day, and there it is,' said Mehalah. 'But now I will ask a question, and I insist on an answer.'

'O! you insist, do you?'

'I insist on an answer,' repeated the girl. 'How did you come to think we were without money?'

'Suppose I don't choose to answer.'

'If you don't—' she began, then hesitated.

'I will tell you,' he said, sulkily. 'Abraham Dowsing, your shepherd, isn't dumb, I believe. He talks, he does, and has pretty well spread the news

all round the country how he was robbed of his money at the Rose.'

'Abraham has never said anything of the sort. He denies that he was robbed.'

'Then he says he is accused of being robbed, which is the same. I suppose the story is true.'

'It is quite true, Master Rebow,' answered the widow. 'It was a terrible loss to us. We had sold all the sheep we could sell.'

'Oh! a terrible loss, indeed!' scoffed the man. 'You are so flush of money, that a loss of ten or fifteen, or may be twenty pounds is nought to you. You have your little store in one of those cupboards in every corner of the old house, and you put your hand in, and take out what you like. You call yourself poor, do you, and think nothing of a loss like this?'

'We are very poor,' said the widow; 'Heaven knows we have a hard battle to fight to make both ends meet, and to pay our rent.'

'I don't believe it. You are telling me lies.'

He took the coin, and counted it; his dark brow grew blacker; and he ground his teeth. Once he raised his wolfish eyes and glared on Mehalah. 'That guinea is bad,' he said, and he threw it on the floor.

'It rings like a good one,' answered the girl, 'pick it up and give it to me. I will let you have another in its place.'

'Oh ho! your pocket is lined with guineas, is it? I will raise the rent of the Ray. I thought as much, the land is fatter than mine on this marsh. You get the place dirt cheap. I'll raise the rent ten pounds. I'll raise it twenty.'

'Master Rebow!' pleaded the widow, 'the Ray won't allow us to pay it.'

'Do not put yourself out, mother,' said Mehalah, 'we have a lease of twenty-one years; and there are seven more years to run, before Rebow can do what he threatens.'

'Oh, you are clever, you are, Glory! cursed clever. Now look here, Mistress Sharland, I'm going to have a rasher, and it's about dinner time, stop and bite with me; and that girl there, she shall bite too. You can't be back till evening, and you'll be perished with hunger.'

'Thank you, master,' answered the widow eagerly.

'And I'll give you a sup of the very primest brandy.'

'Mother, we must return at once. The tide will ebb, and we shall not be able to get away.'

'That's a lie,' said Elijah angrily, 'as you've got here, you can get away. There's plenty of water in the fleet, and will be for three hours. I knew you'd come, and so I got some rashers all ready on the pan; there they be.'

'You're very kind,' observed the widow.

'A landlord is bound to give his tenantry a dinner on rent-day,' said Rebow, with an ugly laugh which displayed his great teeth. 'It's Michaelmas, but I have no goose. I keep plenty on the marshes. They do well here, and they pay well too.'

'I will have a witness that I have paid the rent,' said Mehalah. 'Call one of your men.'

'Go and call one yourself. I am going to fry the rashers.'

'That guinea is still on the floor,' said Mehalah.

'I have refused it. Pick it up, and give me another.'

'I will not pick it up; and I will not give you another till you have convinced me that the coin is bad.'

'Then let it lie.'

'Where are your men?'

'I don't know, go and find them. They're at their dinner now. I dare say near the pump.'

Mehalah left the house, but before she descended the steps, she looked over the flat. There was a sort of shed for cattle half a mile off, and she thought she saw some one moving there. She went at once in that direction.

Scarce was she gone when Elijah beckoned the widow to draw over a chair to the fire.

'You cook the wittles,' said he, 'I'm my own cook in general, but when a woman is here, why, I'm fain to let her take the job off my hands.'

The old woman obeyed with as much activity as she was mistress of. Whilst thus engaged, Elijah walked to the door, opened it, and looked out.

'She's going as straight as a wild duck,' he said, and laughed, 'she is a damned fine girl. Listen to me, mistress, that daughter of yours, Glory, is too good-looking to be mewed up on the Ray. You should marry her, and then settle yourself comfortably down for the rest of your days in your son-in-law's house.'

'Ah! Master Rebow, she is poor, she is, and now young men look out for money.'

'You don't want a very young man for such as she. Why she is as wild as a gipsy, and needs a firm hand to keep her. He that has hold of her should hold fast.'

The widow shook her head. 'We don't see many folks on the Ray. She will have to marry a fellow on the water.'

'No, she won't,' said Rebow angrily. 'Damn her, she shall marry a farmer, who owns land and mashes, and saltings, and housen, and takes rents, and don't mind to drop some eight hundred pound on a bit of a farm that takes his fancy.'

'Such men are not easy to be got.'

'No, there you are right, mistress; but when you find one, why——' he drew his pipe over the inscription on the fireplace. 'I'm the man, and now you hold me, hold fast.'

'You, Master!'

'Aye, I. I like the girl. By God! I *will* have Glory. She was born for me. There is not another girl I have seen that I would give an oystershell for, but she—she—she makes my blood run like melted lead, and my heart here gnaws and burns in my breast like a fiery rat. I tell you I *will* have her. I *will*.'

'If it only rested with me,' moaned the widow.

'Look here,' said Rebow. 'Lay that pan on one side and follow me. I'll show you over the house.' He caught her by the wrist, and dragged

her from room to room, and up the stairs. When he had brought her back to the principal apartment in which they had been sitting, he chuckled with pride. 'Ain't it a good house? It's twenty times better than the Ray. It is more comfortable, and there are more rooms. And all these marshes and meadows are mine, and I have also some cornfields in Virley, on the mainland. And then the Ray is mine, with the saltings and all thereon;—I bought it for eight hundred pounds.'

'We are very much honoured,' said the widow, 'but you do not consider how poor Mehalah is; she has nothing.'

Elijah laughed. 'Not so very poor neither, I fancy. You lost the price of your sheep, and yet you had money in store wherewith to pay the rent.'

'Indeed, indeed we had not.'

'Where then did you get the money?'

'It was lent us.'

'Lent you, who by?' asked Elijah sharply.

'George De Witt was so good——'

Elijah uttered a horrible curse.

'Tell me,' he said furiously, coming up close to the old woman and scowling at her—into her eyes. 'Answer me without a lie; why, by what right

did De Witt lend, or give you, the money? What claim had you on him?'

'Well, Elijah, I must tell you. Mehalah——'

'Here I am,' said the girl throwing open the door. 'Why am I the subject of your talk?' A couple of shepherds followed her.

'Look here,' she said, counting the coin; 'there is a guinea on the floor. Pick it up and try it, if it be good.'

'That's all right,' said one of the men ringing the coin and then trying it between his teeth.

'This is the sum due for our half-year's rent,' she went on. 'Is it not so, Master Rebow? Is not this the sum in full?'

He sullenly gave an affirmative.

'You see that I pay this over to him. I don't want a written receipt. I pay before witnesses.'

Rebow signed to the men to leave, and then with knitted brow collected the money and put it in his pocket. The widow went on with the frying of the bacon.

'Come along with me, mother, to the boat. We can not stay to eat.'

'You shall eat with me. You have come for the first time under my roof to-day, and you shall not go from under it without a bite.'

'I have no appetite.'

'But I have,' said the widow testily. 'I don't see why you are in such a hurry, Mehalah; and what is more, I don't see why you should behave so unpolitely to Master Rebow when he fares to be so civil.'

'Eat then, if you will, mother,' said Mehalah; 'but I cannot. I have no hunger,' after a pause, firmly, 'I will not.'

'Oh, you have a will indeed,' remarked Rebow with a growl. 'A will it would be a pleasure to break, and I'll do it.'

The bacon was fried, and the widow proceeded to dish it up. There was a rack in the next room, as Elijah told her, with plates in it, and there were knives and forks in the drawer.

Whilst the old woman was getting the necessary articles, Rebow was silent, seated in his leather chair, his elbows on his knees, with the pipe in one hand, and his head turned on one side, watching Mehalah out of his fierce, crafty eyes. The girl had seated herself on a chair against the wall, as far away from him as possible. Her arms were folded over her breast, and her head was bent, to avoid encountering his glance. She was

angry with her mother for staying to eat with the man whom she hated.

During this quiet—neither speaking—a curious grating noise reached her ear, and then a clank like that of a chain. She could not quite make out whence the noise came. It was some little while before it sufficiently attracted her attention to make her consider about it; and before she had formed any conclusion, her mother returned, and spread the table, and placed the meat on a dish.

'I'll go and fetch the liquor,' said Rebow, and went away. Whilst he was absent, again the sound met the girl's ears. Neither she nor her mother had spoken, but now she said, 'Listen, mother, what is that sound?'

The old woman stood still for a moment, and then proceeded with her task.

'It is nothing,' she said indifferently, 'the sound comes up from below the floor. I reckon Master Rebow has cows fastened there.'

'By a chain,' added Mehalah, and dismissed the matter from her mind; the explanation satisfied her.

Rebow returned the next moment with a bottle.

'This is prime spirit, this is,' said he. 'You can't drink water here, it gives the fever. You must add spirits to it to make it harmless.'

'You have no beautiful spring here, as we have on the Ray,' observed the widow.

'Not likely to have,' answered the surly landlord. 'Now sit down and eat. Come, Glory.'

She did not move.

'Come, Mehalah, draw up your chair,' said her mother.

'I am not going to eat,' she answered resolutely.

'You shall,' shouted Elijah, rising impetuously, and thrusting his chair back. 'You are insulting me in my own house if you refuse to eat with me.'

'I have no appetite.'

'You will not eat, I heard you say so. I know the devilry of your heart. You will not, but I *will*.' In his rage he stamped on the trap door that he had uncovered, when removing the chair. Instantly a prolonged, hideous howl rose from the depths and rang through the room. Mistress Sharland started back agast. Mehalah raised her head, and the colour left her cheek.

'Oh ho!' roared Elijah. 'You will join in

also, will you?' he drew the bolts passionately back.

'Look here,' he cried to Mehalah. 'Come here!'

Involuntarily she obeyed, and looked down. She saw into a vault feebly illuminated by daylight through one of the circular windows she had noticed on approaching the house. There she saw looking up, directly under the trap, a face so horrible in its dirt and madness that she recoiled.

'She won't eat, she won't bite with me,' shouted Rebow, 'then neither shall her mother eat, nor will I. You shall have the whole.' He caught up the dish, and threw down the rashers. The man below snapped, and caught like a wild beast, and uttered a growl of satisfaction.

Rebow flung the door back into its place; and rebolted it. Then he placed his chair in its former position, and looked composedly from the widow to Mehalah and seemed to draw pleasure from their fear.

'My brother,' he explained. 'Been mad from a child. A good job for me, as he was the elder. Now I have him in keeping, and the land and the house and the money are mine. What I hold, I hold fast. Amen.'

CHAPTER V.

THE DECOY.

THERE was commotion on the beach at Mersea City.

A man of war, a schooner, lay off the entrance to the Blackwater, and was signalling with bunting to the coastguard ship, permanently anchored off the island, which was replying. War had been declared with France some time, but as yet had not interfered with the smuggling trade, which was carried on with the Low Countries. Cruisers in the Channel had made it precarious work along the South Coast, and this had rather stimulated the activity of contraband traffic on the East. I was therefore with no little uneasiness that a war ship was observed standing off the Mersea flats. Why was she there? Was a man of war to cruise about the mouth of the Colne and Blackwater continually? What was the purport of the correspondence carried on between the schooner and the

coastguard? Such were the queries put about among those gathered on the shingle.

They were not long left in doubt, for a boat manned by coastguards left the revenue vessel and ran ashore, the captain sprang out, and went up the beach to his cottage, followed by a couple of the crew. The eager islanders crowded round the remainder, and asked the news.

The captain was appointed to the command of the schooner, the 'Salamander,' which had come from the Downs under the charge of the first lieutenant, to pick him up. The destiny of the 'Salamander' was, of course, unknown.

Captain Macpherson was a keen, canny Scott, small and dapper; as he pushed through the cluster of men in fishing jerseys and wading boots he gave them a nod and a word, 'You ought to be serving your country instead of robbing her, ye loons. Why don't you volunteer like men, there's more money to be made by prizes than by running spirits.'

'That won't do, captain,' said Jim Morrell, an old fisherman. 'We know better than that. There's the oysters.'

'Oysters!' exclaimed the captain; 'there'll be no time for eating oysters now, and no money

to pay for them neither. Come along with me, some of you shore crabs. I promise you better sport than sneaking about the creeks. We'll have at Johnny Crapaud with gun and cutlass.'

Then he entered his cottage, which was near the shore, to say farewell to his wife.

'If there's mischief to be done, that chap will do it,' was the general observation, when his back was turned.

Attention was all at once distracted by a young woman in a tall taxcart who was endeavouring to urge her horse along the road, but the animal, conscious of having an inexperienced hand on the rein, backed, and jibbed, and played a number of tricks, to her great dismay.

'Oh, do please some of you men lead him along. I daresay he will go if his head be turned East, but he is frightened by seeing so many of you.'

'Where are you going, Phœbe?' asked old Morrell.

'I'm only going to Waldgraves,' she answered. 'Oh bother the creature! there he goes again!' as the horse danced impatiently, and swung round.

'De Witt!' she cried in an imploring tone,

'do hold his head. It is a shame of you men not to help a poor girl.'

George at once went to the rescue.

'Lead him on, De Witt, please, till we are away from the beach.'

The young man good-naturedly held the bit, and the horse obeyed without attempting resistance.

'There's a donkey on the lawn by Elm Tree Cottage,' said the girl; 'she brays whenever a horse passes, and I'm mortal afeared lest she scare this beast, and he runs away with me. If he do so, I can't hold him in, my wrists are so weak.'

'Why, Phœbe,' said De Witt, 'what are you driving for? Waldegraves is not more than a mile and a half off, and you might have walked the distance well enough.'

'I've sprained my ankle, and I can't walk. I must go to Waldegraves, I have a message there to my aunt, so Isaac Mead lent me the horse.'

'If you can't drive, you may do worse than sprain your ankle, you may break your neck.'

'That is what I am afraid of, George. The boy was to have driven me, but he is so excited, I suppose, about the man-of-war coming in, that he has run off. There! take care!'

'Can't you go on now?' asked De Witt letting go the bridle. Immediately the horse began to jib and rear.

'You are lugging at his mouth fit to break his jaw, Phœbe. No wonder the beast won't go.'

'Am I, George? It is the fright. I don't understand the horse. O dear! O dear! I shall never get to Waldegraves by myself.'

'Let the horse go, but don't job his mouth in that way.'

'There he is turning round. He will go home again. O George! save me.'

'You are pulling him round, of course he will turn if you drag at the rein.'

'I don't understand horses,' burst forth Phœbe, and she threw the reins down. 'George, there's a good, dear fellow, jump in beside me. There's room for two, quite cosy. Drive me to Waldegraves. I shall never forget your goodness.' She put her two hands together, and looked piteously in the young man's face.

Phœbe Musset was a very good-looking girl, fair with bright blue eyes, and yellow hair, much more delicately made than most of the girls in the place. Moreover, she dressed above them. She was a village coquette, accustomed to being made

much of, and of showing her caprices. Her father owned the store at the city where groceries and drapery were sold, and was esteemed a well-to-do man. He farmed a little land. Phœbe was his only child, and she was allowed to do pretty much as she liked. Her father and mother were hard-working people, but Phœbe's small hands were ever unsoiled, for they were ever unemployed. She neither milked the cows nor weighed the sugar. She liked indeed to be in the shop, to gossip with anyone who came in, and perhaps the only goods she condescended to sell was tobacco to the young sailors, from whom she might calculate on a word of flattery and a lovelorn look. She was always well and becomingly dressed. Now, in a chip bonnet trimmed with blue riband, and tied under the chin, with a white lace-edged kerchief over her shoulders, covering her bosom, she was irresistible. So at least De Witt found her, for he was obliged to climb the gig, seat himself beside her, and assume the reins.

'I'm not much of a steersman in a craft like this,' said George laughing, 'but my hand is stronger than yours, and I can save you from wreck.'

Phœbe looked slyly round, and her great blue

eyes peeped timidly up in the fisherman's face. 'Thank you so much, George. I shall never, never forget your great kindness.'

'There's nothing in it,' said the blunt fisherman; 'I'd do the same for any girl.'

'I know how polite you are,' continued Phœbe, then putting her hand on the reins, 'I don't think you need drive quite so fast, George; I don't want to get the horse hot, or Isaac will scold.'

'A jog trot like this will hurt no horse.'

'Perhaps you want to get back. I am sorry I have taken you away. Of course you have pressing business. No doubt you want to get to the Ray.' A little twinkling sly look up accompanied this speech. De Witt waxed red.

'I'm in no hurry, myself,' he said.

'How delightful, George, nor am I.'

The young man could not resist stealing a glance at the little figure beside him, so neat, so trim, so fresh. He was a humble fellow, and never dreamed himself to be on a level with such a refined damsel. Glory was the girl for him, rough and ready, who could row a boat, and wade in the mud. He loved Glory. She was a sturdy girl, a splendid girl, he said to himself. Phœbe was altogether different, she belonged to another

sphere, he could but look and admire—and worship perhaps. She dazzled him, but he could not love her. She was none of his sort, he said to himself.

'A penny for your thoughts!' said Phœbe roguishly. He coloured. 'I know what you were thinking of. You were thinking of me.'

De Witt's colour deepened. 'I was sure it was so. Now I insist on knowing *what* you were thinking of me.'

'Why,' answered George with a clumsy effort at gallantry, 'I thought what a beauty you were.'

'Oh, George, not when compared with Mehalah.'

De Witt fidgeted in his seat.

'Mehalah is quite of another kind, you see, Miss.'

'I'm no Miss, if you please. Call me Phœbe. It is snugger.'

'She's more—' he puzzled his head for an explanation of his meaning. 'She is more boaty than you are—'

'Phœbe.'

'Than you are,' with hesitation, 'Phœbe.'

'I know;—strides about like a man, smokes and swears, and chews tobacco.'

'No, no, you mistake me M——.'

'Phœbe.'

'You mistake me, Phœbe.'

'I have often wondered, George, what attracted you to Mehalah. To be sure, it will be a very convenient thing for you to have a wife who can swab the deck, and tar the boat and calk her. But then I should have fancied a man would have liked something different from a—sort of a man-woman—a jack tar or Ben Brace in petticoats, to sit by his fireside, and to take to his heart. But of course it is not for me to speak on such matters, only I somehow can't help thinking about you, George, and it worries me so, I lie awake at nights, and wonder and wonder, whether you will be happy. She has the temper of a tom cat, I'm told. She blazes up like gunpowder.'

De Witt fidgeted yet more uneasily. He did not like this conversation.

'Then she is half a gipsy. So you mayn't be troubled with her long. She'll keep with you as long as she likes, and then up with her pack, on with her wading boots. Yo heave hoy! and away she goes.'

De Witt, in his irritation, gave the horse a stinging switch across the flank, and he started

forward. A little white hand was laid, not now on the reins, but on his hand.

'I'm so sorry, George my friend; after your kindness, I have teased you unmercifully, but I can't help it. When I think of Mehalah in her wading boots and jersey and cap, it makes me laugh—and yet when I think of her and you together, I'm ashamed to say I feel as if I could cry. George!' she suddenly ejaculated.

'Yes, Miss!'

'Phœbe, not Miss, please.'

'I wasn't going to say Miss.'

'What were you going to say?'

'Why mate, yes, mate! I get into the habit of it at sea,' he apologised.

'I like it. Call me mate. We are on a cruise together now, you and I, and I trust myself entirely in your hands, captain.'

'What was it you fared to ask, mate, when you called "George"?'

'Oh, this. The wind is cold, and I want my cloak and hood, they are down somewhere behind the seat in the cart. If I take the reins will you lean over and get them?'

'You won't upset the trap?'

'No.' He brought up the cloak and adjusted it

round Phœbe's shoulders, and drew the hood over her bonnet, she would have it to cover her head.

'Doesn't it make me a fright?' she asked, looking into his face.

'Nothing can do that,' he answered readily.

'Well, push it back again, I feel as if it made me one, and that is as bad. There now. Thank you, mate! Take the reins again.'

'Halloo! we are in the wrong road. We have turned towards the Strood.'

'Dear me! so we have. That is the horse's doing. I let him go where he liked, and he went down the turn. I did not notice it. All I thought of was holding up his head lest he should stumble.'

De Witt endeavoured to turn the horse.

'Oh don't, don't attempt it!' exclaimed Phœbe. 'The lane is so narrow, that we shall be upset. Better drive on, and round by the Barrow Farm, there is not half-a-mile difference.'

'A good mile, mate. However, if you wish it.'

'I do wish it. This is a pleasant drive, is it not, George?'

'Very pleasant,' he said, and to himself added, 'too pleasant.'

So they chatted on till they reached the farm called Waldegraves, and there Phœbe alighted.

'I shall not be long,' she said, at the door, turning and giving him a look which might mean a great deal or nothing, according to the character of the woman who cast it.

When she came up she said, 'There, George, I cut my business as short as possible. Now what do you say to showing me the Decoy? I have never seen it, but I have heard a great deal of it, and I cannot understand how it is contrived.'

'It is close here,' said De Witt.

'I know it is, the little stream in this dip feeds it. Will you show me the Decoy?'

'But your foot—Phœbe. You have sprained your ankle.'

'If I may lean on your arm I think I can limp down there. It is not very far.'

'And then what about the horse?'

'Oh! the boy here will hold it, or put it up in the stable. Run and call him, George.'

'I could drive you down there I think, at least within a few yards of the place, and if we take the boy he can hold the horse by the gate.'

'I had rather hobble down on your arm, George.'

'Then come along, mate.'

The Decoy was a sheet of water covering perhaps an acre and a half in the midst of a wood. The clay that had been dug out for its construction had been heaped up, forming a little hill crowned by a group of willows. No one who has seen this ill-used tree in its mutilated condition, cut down to a stump which bristles with fresh withes, has any idea what a stately and beautiful tree it is when allowed to grow naturally. The old untrimmed willow is one of the noblest of our native trees. It may be seen thus in well-timbered parts of Suffolk, and occasionally in Essex. The pond was fringed with rushes, except at the horns, where the nets and screens stood for the trapping of the birds. From the mound above the distant sea was visible, through a gap in the old elm trees that stood below the pool. In that gap was visible the war-schooner, lying as near shore as possible. George De Witt stood looking at it. The sea was glittering like silver, and the hull of the vessel was dark against the shining belt. A boat with a sail was approaching her.

'That is curious,' observed George. 'I could swear to yon boat. I know her red sail. She

belongs to my cousin Elijah Rebow. But he can have nought to do with the schooner.'

Phœbe was impatient with anything save herself attracting the attention of the young fisherman. She drew him from the mound, and made him explain to her the use of the rush-platted screens, the arched and funnel-shaped net, and the manner in which the decoy ducks were trained to lead the wild birds to their destruction.

'They are very silly birds to be led like that,' said she.

'They little dream whither and to what they are being drawn,' said De Witt.

'I suppose some little ducks are dreadfully enticing,' said Phœbe, with a saucy look and a twinkle of the blue eyes. 'Look here, George, my bonnet-strings are untied, and my hands are quite unable to manage a bow, unless I am before a glass. Do you think you could tie them for me?'

'Put up your chin, then,' said De Witt with a sigh. He knew he was a victim; he was going against his conscience. He tried to think of Mehalah, but could not with those blue eyes looking so confidingly into his. He put his finger

under her chin and raised it. He was looking full into that sweet saucy face.

'What sort of a knot? I can tie only sailor's knots.'

'Oh George! something like a true lover's knot.'

Was it possible to resist, with those damask cheeks, those red lips, and those pleading eyes so close, so completely in his power? George did not resist. He stooped and kissed the wicked lips, and cheeks, and eyes.

Phœbe drew away her face at once, and hid it. He took her arm and led her away. She turned her head from him, and did not speak.

He felt that the little figure at his side was shaken with some hysterical movement, and felt frightened.

'I have offended you, I am very sorry. I could not help it. Your lips did tempt me so; and you looked up at me just as if you were saying, "Kiss me!" I could not help it. You are crying. I have offended you.'

'No, I am laughing. Oh George! Oh George!'

They walked back to the farm without speak-

ing. De Witt was ashamed of himself, yet felt he was under a spell which he could not break. A rough fisher lad flattered by a girl he had looked on as his superior, and beyond his approach, now found himself the object of her advances; the situation was more than his rude virtue could withstand. He knew that this was a short dream of delight, which would pass, and leave no substance, but whilst under the charm of the dream, he could not cry out nor move a finger to arouse himself to real life.

Neither spoke for a few minutes. But, at last, George De Witt turned, and looking with a puzzled face at Phœbe Musset said, 'You asked me on our way to Waldegraves what I was thinking about, and offered me a penny for my thoughts. Now I wonder what you are lost in a brown study about, and I will give you four farthings for what is passing in your little golden head.'

'You must not ask me, George—dear George.'

'Oh mate, you must tell me.'

'I dare not. I shall be so ashamed.'

'Then look aside when you speak.'

'No, I can't do that. I must look you full in

the face; and do you look me in the face too. George, I was thinking—Why did you not come and talk to me, before you went courting that gipsy girl, Mehalah. Are you not sorry now that you are tied to her?'

His eyes fell. He could not speak.

CHAPTER VI

BLACK OR GOLD.

When De Witt drove up to the 'City' with Phœbe Musset, the first person he saw on the beach was the last person that, under present circumstances, he wished to see—Mehalah Sharland. Phœbe perceived her at once, and rejoiced at the opportunity that offered to profit by it.

For a long time Phœbe had been envious of the reputation as a beauty possessed by Mehalah. Her energy, determination and courage made her highly esteemed among the fishermen, and the expressions of admiration lavished on her handsome face and generous character had roused all the venom in Phœbe's nature. She desired to reign as queen paramount of beauty, and, like Elizabeth, could endure no rival. George De Witt was the best built and most pleasant faced of all the Mersea youths, and he had hitherto held aloof from her and paid his

homage to the rival queen. This had awakened Phœbe's jealousy. She had no real regard, no warm affection for the young fisherman; she thought him handsome, and was glad to flirt with him, but he had made no serious impression on her heart, for Phœbe had not a heart on which any deep impression could be made. She had laid herself out to attract and entangle him from love of power, and desire to humble Mehalah. She did not know whether any actual engagement existed between George and Glory, probably she did not care. If there were, so much the better, it would render her victory more piquant and complete.

She would trifle with the young man for a few weeks or a month, till he had broken with her rival, and then she would keep him or cast him off as suited her caprice. By taking him up, she would sting other admirers into more fiery pursuit, blow the smouldering embers into flaming jealousy, and thus flatter her vanity and assure her supremacy. The social laws of rural life are the same as those in higher walks, but unglossed and undisguised. In the realm of nature it is the female who pursues and captures, not captivates, the male. As in Eden, so in this degenerate

paradise, it is Eve who walks Adam, at first in wide, then in gradually contracting circles, about the forbidden tree, till she has brought him to take the unwholesome morsel. The male bird blazes in gorgeous plumage and swims alone on the glassy pool, but the sky is speckled with sombre feathered females who disturb his repose, drive him into a corner and force him to divide his worms, and drudge for them in collecting twigs and dabbing mud about their nest. The male glow-worm browses on the dewy blades by his moony lamp; it is the lack-light female that buzzes about him, coming out of obscurity, obscure herself, flattering and fettering him and extinguishing his lamp.

Where culture prevails, the sexes change their habits with ostentation, but remain the same in proclivities behind disguise. The male is supposed to pursue the female he seeks as his mate, to hover round her; and she is supposed to coyly retire, and start from his advances. But her modesty is as unreal as the *nolo episcopari* of a simoniacal bishop-elect. Bashfulness is a product of education, a mask made by art. The cultured damsel hunts not openly, but like a poacher, in the dark. Eve put off modesty when she put on fig-leaves; in the simplicity of the country, he

daughters walk without either. The female gives chase to the male as a matter of course, as systematically and unblushingly in rustic life, as in the other grades of brute existence. The mother adorns her daughter for the war-path with paint and feathers, and sends her forth with a blessing and a smile to fulfil the first duty of woman, and the meed of praise is hers when she returns with a masculine heart, yet hot and mangled, at her belt.

The Early Church set apart one day in seven for rest; the Christian pagans set it apart for the exercise of the man hunt. The Stuart bishops published a book on Sunday amusements, and allowed of Sabbath hunting. They followed, and did not lead opinion. It is the coursing day of days when marriage-wanting maids are in full cry and scent of all marriageable men.

A village girl who does not walk about her boy is an outlaw to the commonwealth, a renegade to her sex. A lover is held to be of as much necessity as an umbrella, a maiden must not go out without either. If she cannot attract one by her charms, she must retain him with a fee. Rural morality moreover allows her to change the beau on her arm as often as the riband in her cap, but not to be seen about, at least on Sunday, devoid of either.

Phœbe Musset intended some day to marry, but had not made up her mind whom to choose, and when to alter her condition. She would have liked a well-to-do young farmer, but there happened to be no man of this kind available. There were, indeed, at Peldon four bachelor brothers of the name of Marriage, but they were grown grey in celibacy and not disposed to change their lot. One of the principal Mersea farmers was named Wise, and had a son of age, but he was an idiot. The rest were afflicted with only daughters—afflicted from Phœbe's point of view, blessed from their own. There was a widower, but to take a widower was like buying a broken-kneed horse.

George was comfortably off. He owned some oyster pans and gardens, and had a fishing smack.

But he was not a catch. There were, however, no catches to be angled, trawled or dredged for. Phœbe did not trouble herself greatly about the future. Her father and mother would, perhaps, not be best pleased were she to marry off the land, but the wishes of her parents were of no weight with Phœbe, who was determined to suit her own fancy.

As she approached the 'City,' she saw Glory surrounded by young boatmen, eager to get a

word from her lips or a glance from her eyes. Phœbe's heart contracted with spite, but next moment swelled with triumph at the thought that it lay in her power to wound her rival and exhibit her own superiority, before the eyes of all assembled on the beach.

'There is the boy from the Leather Bottle, George,' said she, 'he shall take the horse.'

De Witt descended and helped her to alight, then directly, to her great indignation, made his way to Mehalah. Glory put out both hands to him and smiled. Her smile, which was rare, was sweet; it lighted up and transformed a face somewhat stern and dark.

'Where have you been, George?'

'I have been driving that girl yonder, what's-her-name, to Waldegraves.'

'What, Phœbe Musset? I did not know you could drive.'

'I can do more than row a boat and catch crabs, Glory.'

'What induced you to drive her?'

'I could not help myself, I was driven into doing so. You see, Glory, a fellow is not always his own master. Circumstances are sometimes stronger than his best purposes, and like a mass of

seaweed arrest his oar and perhaps upset his boat.'

'Why, bless the boy!' exclaimed Mehalah, 'What are all these excuses for? I am not jealous.'

'But I am,' said Phœbe who had come up. 'George, you are very ungallant to desert me. You have forgotten your promise, moreover.'

'What promise?'

'There! what promise you say, as if your head were a riddle and everything put in except clots of clay and pebbles fell through. Mehalah has stuck in the wires, and poor little I have been sifted out.'

'But what did I promise?'

'To show me the hull in which you and your mother live, the "Pandora" I think you call her.'

'Did I promise?'

'Yes you did, when we were together at the Decoy under the willows. I told you I wished greatly to be introduced to the interior and see how you lived.' Turning to Mehalah, 'George and I have been to the Decoy. He was most good-natured, and explained the whole contrivance to me, and—and illustrated it. We had a very pleasant little trot together, had we not, George?'

'Oh! this is what's-her-name, is it?' said Mehalah in a low tone with an amused look. She was neither angry nor jealous, she despised Phœbe too heartily to be either, though with feminine instinct she perceived what the girl was about, and saw through all her affectation.

'If I made the promise, I must of course keep it,' said George, 'but it is strange I should not remember having made it.'

'I dare say you forget a great many things that were said and done at the Decoy, but,' with a little affected sigh, 'I do not, I never shall, I fear.'

George De Witt looked uncomfortable and awkward. 'Will not another day do as well?'

'No, it will not, George,' said Phœbe petulantly. 'I know you have no engagement, you said so when you volunteered to drive me to Waldegraves.'

De Witt turned to Mehalah, and said, 'Come along with us, Glory! my mother will be glad to see you.'

'Oh! don't trouble yourself, Miss Sharland—or Master Sharland, which is it?'—staring first at the short petticoats, and then at the cap and jersey.

'Come, Glory,' repeated De Witt, and looked

so uncomfortable that Mehalah readily complied with his request.

'I can give you oysters and ale, natives, you have never tasted better.'

'No ale for me, George,' said Phœbe. 'It is getting on for five o'clock when I take a dish of tea.'

'Tea!' echoed De Witt, 'I have no such dainty on board. But I can give you rum or brandy, if you prefer either to ale. Mother always has a glass of grog about this time; the cockles of her heart require it, she says.'

'You must give me your arm, George, you know I have sprained my ankle. I really cannot walk unsupported.'

De Witt looked at Mehalah and then at Phœbe, who gave him such a tender, entreating glance that he was unable to refuse his arm. She leaned heavily on it, and drew very close to his side; then, turning her head over her shoulder, with a toss of the chin, she said, 'Come along, Mehalah!'

Glory's brow began to darken. She was displeased. George also turned and nodded to the girl, who walked in the rear with her head down. He signed to her to join him.

'Do you know, Glory, what mother did the other night when I failed to turn up—that night you fetched me concerning the money that was stolen? She was vexed at my being out late, and not abed at eleven. As you know, I could not be so. I left the Ray as soon as all was settled, and as you put me across to the Fresh Marsh, I got home across the pasture and the fields as quickly as I could, but was not here till after eleven. Mother was angry, she had pulled up the ladder, but before that she tarred the vessel all round, and she stuck a pail of sea water atop of the place where the ladder goes. Well, then, I came home and found the ladder gone, so I laid hold of the rope that hangs there, and then souse over me came the water. I saw mother was vexed, and wanted to serve me out for being late; however, I would not be beat, so I tried to climb the side, and got covered with tar.'

'You got in, however?'

'No, I did not, I went to the public-house, and laid the night there.'

'I would have gone through tar, water, and fire,' said Glory vehemently. 'I would not have been beat.'

'I have no doubt about it, *you* would,' ob-

served George, 'but you forget there might be worse things behind. An old woman after a stiff glass of grog, when her monkey is up, is better left to sleep off her liquor and her displeasure before encountered.'

'I would not tell the story,' said Mehalah; 'it does you no credit.'

'This is too bad of you, Glory! You ran me foul of her, and now reproach me for my steering.'

'You will run into plenty of messes if you go after Mehalah at night,' put in Phœbe with a saucy laugh.

'Glory!' said De Witt, 'come on the other side of Phœbe and give her your arm. She is lame. She has hurt her foot, and we are coming now to the mud.'

'Oh I cannot think of troubling Mehalah,' said Phœbe sharply; 'you do not mind my leaning my whole weight on you, I know, George. You did not mind it at the Decoy.'

'Here is the ladder,' said De Witt; 'step on my foot and then you will not dirty your shoe-leather in the mud. Don't think you will hurt me. A light feather like you will be unfelt.'

'Do you keep the ladder down day and night?' asked Glory.

'No. It is always hauled up directly I come home. Only that one night did mother draw it up without me. We are as safe in the "Pandora" as you are at the Ray.'

'And there is this in the situation which is like,' said Phœbe, pertly, 'that neither can entice robbers, and need securing, as neither has anything to lose.'

'I beg your pardon,' answered George, 'there are my savings on board. My mother sleeps soundly, so she will not turn in till the ladder is up. That is the same as locking the door on land. If you have money in the till——'

'There always is money there, plenty of it too.'

'I have no doubt about it, Phœbe. Under these circumstances you do not go to bed and leave your door open.'

'I should think not. You go first up the ladder, I will follow. Mehalah can stop and paddle in her native mud, or come after us as suits her best.' Turning her head to Glory she said, 'Two are company, three are none.' Then to the young man, 'George, give me your hand to help me on deck, you forget your manners. I fear the Decoy is where you have left and lost them.'

She jumped on deck. Mehalah followed without asking for or expecting assistance.

The vessel was an old collier, which George's father had bought when no longer seaworthy for a few pounds. He had run her up on the Hard, dismasted her, and converted her into a dwelling. In it George had been born and reared. 'There is one advantage in living in a house such as this,' said De Witt; 'we pay neither tax, nor tithe, nor rate.'

'Is that you?' asked a loud hard voice, and a head enveloped in a huge mob cap appeared from the companion ladder. 'What are you doing there, gallivanting with girls all day? Come down to me and let's have it out.'

'Mother is touchy,' said George in a subdued voice; 'she gets a little rough and knotty at times, but she is a rare woman for melting and untying speedily.'

'Come here, George!' cried the rare woman.

'I am coming, mother.' He showed the two girls the ladder; Mrs. De Witt had disappeared. 'Go down into the forecabin, then straight on. Turn your face to the ladder as you descend.' Phœbe hesitated. She was awestruck by the voice and appearance of Mrs. De Witt. However,

at a sign from George she went down, and was followed by Mehalah. Bending her head, she passed through the small fore-cabin where was George's bunk, into the main cabin which served as kitchen, parlour, and bedroom to Mrs. De Witt. A table occupied the centre, and at the end was an iron cooking stove. Everything was clean, tidy, and comfortable. On a shelf at the side stood the chairs. Mrs. De Witt whisked one down.

'Your servant,' said she to Phœbe, with more amiability than the girl anticipated. 'Yours too, Glory,' curtly to Mehalah.

Mrs. De Witt was not favourable to her son's attachment to Glory. She was an imperious, strong-minded woman, a despot in her own house, and she had no wish to see that house invaded by a daughter-in-law as strong of will and iron-headed as herself. She wished to see George mated to a girl whom she could browbeat and manage as she browbeat and managed her son. George's indecision of character was due in measure to his bringing up by such a mother. He had been cuffed and yelled at from infancy. His intimacy with the maternal lap had been contracted head downwards, and was

connected with a stinging sensation at the rear. Self-assertion had been beat or bawled out of him. She was not a bad, but a despotic woman. She liked to have her own way, and she obtained it, first with her husband, and then with her son, and the ease with which she had mastered and maintained the sovereignty had done her as much harm as them.

If a beggar be put on horseback he will ride to the devil, and a woman in command will proceed to unsex herself. She was a good-hearted woman at bottom, but then that bottom where the good heart lay was never to be found with an anchor, but lay across the course as a shoal where deep water was desired. Her son knew perfectly where it was not, but never where it was. Mrs. De Witt in face somewhat resembled her nephew, Elijah Rebow, but she was his senior by ten years. She had the same hawk-like nose and dark eyes, but was without the wolfish jaw. Nor had she the eager intelligence that spoke out of Elijah's features. Hers were hard and coarse and unillumined with mind.

When she saw Phœbe enter her cabin she was both surprised and gratified. A fair, feeble, bread-and-butter Miss, such as she held the girl

to be, was just the daughter she fancied. Were she to come to the 'Pandora' with whims and graces, the month of honey with George would assume the taste of vinegar with her, and would end in the new daughter's absolute submission. She would be able to convert such a girl very speedily into a domestic drudge and a recipient of her abuse. Men make themselves, but women are made, and the making of women, thought Mrs. De Witt, should be in the hands of women; men botched them, because they let them take their own way.

Mrs. De Witt never forgave her parents for having bequeathed her no money; she could not excuse Elijah for having taken all they left, without considering her. She found a satisfaction in discharging her wrongs on others. She was a saving woman, and spent little money on her personal adornment. 'What coin I drop,' she was wont to say, 'I drop in rum, and smuggled rum is cheap.'

But though an article is cheap, a great consumption of it may cause the item to be a serious one; and it was so with Mrs. De Witt.

The vessel to which she acted as captain, steward, and cook, was named the 'Pandora.'

The vicar was wont to remark that it was a 'Pandora's' box full of all gusts, but minus gentle Zephyr.

'Will you take a chair?' she said obsequiously to Phœbe, placing the chair for her, after having first breathed on the seat and wiped it with her sleeve. Then turning to Mehalah, she asked roughly, 'Well, Glory! how is that old fool, your mother?'

'Better than your manners,' replied Mehalah.

'I am glad you are come, Glory,' said Mrs. De Witt, 'I want to have it out with you. What do you mean by coming here of a night, and carrying off my son when he ought to be under his blankets in his bunk? I won't have it. He shall keep proper hours. Such conduct is not decent. What do you think of that?' she asked, seating herself on the other side of the table, and addressing Phœbe, but leaving Mehalah standing. 'What do you think of a girl coming here after nightfall, and asking my lad to go off for a row with her all in the dark, and the devil knows whither they went, and the mischief they were after. It is not respectable, is it?'

'George should not have gone when she asked him,' said the girl.

'Dear Sackalive! she twists him round her little finger. He no more dare deny her anything than he dare defy me. But I will have my boy respectable, I can promise you. I combed his head well for him when he came home, I did by cock! He shall not do the thing again.'

'Look here, mother,' remonstrated George; 'wash our dirty linen in private.'

'Indeed!' exclaimed Mrs. De Witt. 'That is strange doctrine! Why, who would know we wore any linen at all next our skin, unless we exposed it when washed over the side of the wessel? Now you come here. I have a bone to pick along with you, George!'

To be on a level with her son, and stare him full in the eyes, a way she had with everyone she assailed, she sat on the table, and put her feet on the chair.

'What has become of the money? I have been to the box, and there are twenty pounds gone out of it, all in gold. I haven't took it, so you must have. Now I want to know what you have done with it. I will have it out. I endure no evasions. Where is the money? Fork it out, or I will turn all your pockets inside out, and find and retake it. You want no money, not you. I

provide you with tobacco. Where is the money? Twenty pounds, and all in gold. I was like a shrimp in scalding water when I went to the box to-day and found the money gone. I turned that red you might have said it was erysipelas. I shruck out that they might have heard me at the City. Turn your pockets out at once.'

George looked abashed; he was cowed by his mother.

'I'll take the carving knife to you!' said the woman, 'if you do not hand me over the cash at once.'

'Oh don't, pray don't hurt him!' cried Phœbe, interposing her arm, and beginning to cry.

'Dear Sackalive!' exclaimed Mrs. De Witt, 'I am not aiming at his witals, but at his pockets. Where is the money?'

'I have had it,' said Mehalah, stepping forward and standing between De Witt and his mother. 'George has behaved generously, nobly by us. You have heard how we were robbed of our money. We could not have paid our rent for the Ray had not George let us have twenty pounds. He shall not lose it.'

'You had it, you!—you!' cried Mrs. De Witt

in wild and fierce astonishment. 'Give it up to me at once.'

'I can not do so. The greater part is gone. I paid the money to-day to Rebow, our landlord.'

'Elijah has it! Elijah gets everything. My father left me without a shilling, and now he gets my hard-won earnings also.'

'It seems to me, mistress, that the earnings belong to George, and surely he has a right to do with them what he will,' said Mehalah, coldly.

'That is your opinion, is it? It is not mine.' Then she mused: 'Twenty pounds is a fortune. One may do a great deal with such a sum as that, Mehalah; twenty pounds is twenty pounds what ever you may say; and it must be repaid.'

'It shall be.'

'When?'

'As soon as I can earn the money.'

Mrs. De Witt's eye now rested on Phœbe, and she assumed a milder manner. Her mood was variable as the colour of the sea; 'I'm obliged to be peremptory at times,' she said; 'I have to maintain order in the wessel. You will stay and have something to eat?'

'Thank you; your son has already promised us some oysters,—that is, promised *me*.'

'Come on deck,' said George. 'We will have them there, and mother shall brew the liquor below.'

The mother grunted a surly acquiescence.

When the three had re-ascended the ladder, the sun was setting. The mouth of the Blackwater glittered like gold leaf fluttered by the breath. The tide had begun to flow, and already the water had surrounded the 'Pandora.' Phœbe and Mehalah would have to return by boat, or be carried by De Witt.

The two girls stood side by side. The contrast between them was striking, and the young man noticed it. Mehalah was tall, lithe, and firm as a young pine, erect in her bearing, with every muscle well developed, firm of flesh, her skin a rich ripe apricot, and her eyes, now that the sun was in them, like volcanic craters, gloomy, but full of fire. Her hair, rich to profusion, was black, yet with coppery hues in it when seen with a side light. It was simply done up in a knot, neatly not elaborately. Her navy-blue jersey and skirt, the scarlet of her cap and kerchief, and of a petticoat that appeared below the skirt, made her a rich combination of colour, suitable to a sunny clime rather than to the misty bleak east coast.

Phœbe was colourless beside her, a faded picture, faint in outline. Her complexion was delicate as the rose, her frame slender, her contour undulating and weak. She was the pattern of a trim English village maiden, with the beauty of youth, and the sweetness of ripening womanhood, *sans* sense, *sans* passion, *sans* character, *sans* everything—pretty vacuity. She seemed to feel her own inferiority beside the gorgeous Mehalah, and to be angry at it. She took off her bonnet, and the wind played with her yellow curls, and the setting sun spun them into a halo of gold about her delicate face.

'Loose your hair, Mehalah,' said the spiteful girl.

'What for?'

'I want to see how it will look in the sun.'

'Do so, Glory!' begged George. 'How shining Phœbe's locks are. One might melt and coin them into guineas.'

Mehalah pulled out a pin, and let her hair fall, a flood of warm black with red gleams in it. It reached her waist, and the wind scattered it about her like a veil.

If Phœbe's hair resembled a spring fleecy cloud gilded by the sun, buoyant in the soft warm air, that of Mehalah was like an angry thunder

shower with a promise of sunshine gleaming through the rain.

'Black or gold, which do you most admire, George?' asked the saucy girl.

'That is not a fair question to put to me,' said De Witt in reply; but he put his fingers through the dark tresses of Mehalah, and raised them to his lips. Phœbe bit her tongue.

'George,' she said sharply. 'See the sun is in my hair. I am in glory. That is better than being so only in name.'

'But your glory is short-lived, Phœbe; the sun will be set in a minute, and then it is no more.'

'And hers,' she said spitefully, 'hers—you imply—endures eternally. I will go home.'

'Do not be angry, Phœbe, there can not be thunder in such a golden cloud. There can be nothing worse than a rainbow.'

'What have you got there about your neck, George?' she asked, pacified by the compliment.

'A riband.'

'Yes, and something at the end of it—a locket containing a tuft of black horsehair.'

'No, there is not.'

'Call me "mate," as you did when we were

at the Decoy. How happy we were there, but then we were alone, that makes all the difference.'

George did not answer. Mehalah's hot blood began to fire her dark cheek.

'Tell me what you have got attached to that riband; if you love me, tell me, George. We girls are always inquisitive.'

'A keepsake, Phœbe.'

'A keepsake! Then I must see it.' She snatched at the riband where it showed above De Witt's blue jersey.

'I noticed it before, when you were so attentive at the Decoy.'

Mehalah interposed her arm, and placing her open hand on George's breast, thrust him out of the reach of the insolent flirt.

'For shame of you, how dare you behave thus!' she exclaimed.

'Oh dear!' cried Phœbe, 'I see it all. Your keepsake. How sentimental! Oh, George! I shall die of laughing.'

She went into pretended convulsions of merriment. 'I cannot help it, this is really too ridiculous.'

Mehalah was trembling with anger. Her gipsy blood was in flame. There is a flagrant

spirit in such veins which soon bursts into an explosion of fire.

Phœbe stepped up to her, and holding her delicate fingers beside the strong hand of Mehalah, whispered, 'Look at these little fingers. They will pluck your love out of your rude clutch.' She saw that she was stinging her rival past endurance. She went on aloud, casting a saucy side glance at De Witt, 'I should like to add my contribution to the trifle that is collecting for you since you lost your money. I suppose there is a brief. Off with the red cap and pass it round. Here is a crown.'

The insult was unendurable. Mehalah's passion overpowered her. In a moment she had caught up the girl, and without considering what she was doing, she flung her into the sea. Then she staggered back and panted for breath.

A cry of dismay from De Witt. He rushed to the side.

'Stay!' said Mehalah, restraining him with one hand and pressing the other to her heart. 'She will not drown.'

The water was not deep. Several fisherlads had already sprung to the rescue, and Phœbe was drawn limp and dripping towards the shore.

Mehalah stooped, picked up the girl's straw hat, and slung it after her.

A low laugh burst from someone riding in a boat under the side of the vessel.

'Well done, Glory! You served the pretty vixen right. I love you for it.'

She knew the voice. It was that of Rebow. He must have heard, perhaps seen all.

CHAPTER VII.

LIKE A BAD PENNY.

'For shame, Glory!' exclaimed De Witt when he had recovered from his surprise but not from his dismay. 'How could you do such a wicked and unwomanly act?'

'For shame, George!' answered Mehalah, gasping for breath. 'You stood by all the while, and listened whilst that jay snapped and screamed at me, and tormented me to madness, without interposing a word.'

'I am angry. Your behaviour has been that of a savage!' pursued George, thoroughly roused. 'I love you, Glory, you know I do. But this is beyond endurance.'

'If you are not prepared, or willing to right me, I must defend myself,' said Mehalah; 'and I will do it. I bore as long as I could bear, expecting every moment that you would silence her, and speak out, and say, "Glory is mine, and I will

not allow her to be affronted." But not a step did you take, not a finger did you lift; and then, at last, the fire in my heart burst forth and sent up a smoke that darkened my eyes and bewildered my brain. I could not see, I could not think. I did not know, till all was over, what I had done. George! I know I am rough and violent, when these rages come over me, I am not to be trifled with.'

'I hope they never may come over you when you have to do with me,' said De Witt sulkily.

'I hope not, George. Do not trifle with me, do not provoke me. I have the gipsy in me, but under control. All at once the old nature bursts loose, and then I do I know not what. I cannot waste my energy in words like some, and I cannot contend with such a girl as that with the tongue.'

'What will folks say of this?'

'I do not care. They may talk. But now, George, let me warn you. That girl has been trifling with you, and you have been too blind and foolish to see her game and keep her at arm's length.'

'You are jealous because I speak to another girl besides you.'

'No, I am not. I am not one to harbour

jealousy. Whom I trust I trust with my whole heart. Whom I believe I believe with my entire soul. I know you too well to be jealous. I know as well that you could not be false to me in thought or in act as I know my truth to you. I cannot doubt you, for had I thought it possible that you would give me occasion to doubt, I could not have loved you.'

'Sheer off!' exclaimed George, looking over his shoulder. 'Here comes the old woman.'

The old woman appeared, scrambling on deck, her cap-frills bristling about her ears, like the feathers of an angry white cockatoo.

'What is all this? By jaggers! where is Phœbe Musset? What have you done with her? Where have you put her? What were those screams about?'

'Sheer off while you may,' whispered De Witt, 'the old woman is not to be faced when wexed no more than a hurricane. Strike sail, and run before the wind.'

'What have you done with the young woman? Where is she? Produce the corpse. I heard her as she shruck out.'

'She insulted me,' said Mehalah, still agitated by passion, 'and I flung her overboard.'

Mrs. De Witt rushed to the bulwarks, and saw the dripping damsel being carried—she could not walk—from the Strand to her father's house.

'You chucked her overboard!' exclaimed the old woman, and she caught up a swabbing-mop. 'How dare you? She was my visitor; she came to sip my grog and eat my natives at my hospitable board, and you chucked her into the sea as though she were a picked cockleshell!'

'She insulted me,' said Mehalah angrily.

'I will teach you to play the dog-fish among my herrings, to turn this blessed peaceful "Pandora" into a cage of bears!' cried Mrs. De Witt, charging with her mop.

Mehalah struck the weapon down, and put her foot on it.

'Take care!' she exclaimed, her voice trembling with passion. 'In another moment you will have raised the devil in me again.'

'He don't take much raising,' vociferated Mrs. De Witt. 'I will teach you to assault a genteel young female who comes a wisiting of me and my son in our own wessel. Do you think you are already mistress here? Does the "Pandora" belong to you? Am I to be chucked overboard

along with every lass that wexes you? Am I of no account any more in the eyes of my son, that I suckled from my maternal bottle, and fed with egg and pap out of my own spoon?'

'For heaven's sake,' interrupted George, 'sheer off, Mehalah. Mother is the dearest old lady in the world when she is sober. She is a Pacific Ocean when not vexed with storms. She will pacify presently.'

'I will go, George,' said Mehalah, panting with anger, her veins swollen, her eye sparkling, and her lip quivering; 'I will go, and I will never set foot in this boat again, till you and your mother have asked my pardon for this conduct; she for this outrage, you for having allowed me to receive insult, white-livered coward that you are.'

She flung herself down the ladder, and waded ashore.

Mrs. De Witt's temper abated as speedily as it rose. She retired to her grog. She set feet downwards on the scene; the last of her stalwart form to disappear was the glowing countenance set in white rays.

George was left to his own reflections. He saw Mehalah get into her boat and row away.

He waved his cap to her, but she did not return the salute. She was offended grievously. George was placed in a difficult situation. The girl to whom he was betrothed was angry, and had declared her determination not to tread the planks of the 'Pandora' again, and the girl who had made advances to him, and whom his mother would have favoured, had been ejected unceremoniously from it, and perhaps injured, at all events irretrievably offended.

It was incumbent on him to go to the house of the Mussets and enquire for Phœbe. He could do no less; so he descended the ladder and took his way thither.

Phœbe was not hurt, she was only frightened. She had been wet through, and was at once put to bed. She cried a great deal, and old Musset vowed he would take out a summons against the aggressor. Mrs. Musset wept in sympathy with her daughter, and then fell on De Witt for having permitted the assault to take place unopposed.

'How could I interfere?' he asked, desperate with his difficulties. 'It was up and over with her before I was aware.'

'My girl is not accustomed to associate with

cannibals,' said Mrs. Musset, drawing herself out like a telescope.

As George returned much crestfallen to the beach, now deserted, for the night had come on, he was accosted by Elijah Rebow.

'George!' said the owner of Red Hall, laying a hand on his cousin's shoulder, 'you ought not to be here.'

'Where ought I to be, Elijah? It seems to me that I have been everywhere to-day where I ought not to be. I am left in a hopeless muddle.'

'You ought not to allow Glory to part from you in anger.'

'How can I help it? I am sorry enough for the quarrel, but you must allow her conduct was trying to the temper.'

'She had great provocation. I wonder she did not kill that girl. She has a temper, has Mehalah, that does not stick at trifles; but she is generous and forgiving.'

'She is so angry with me that I doubt I shall not be able to bring her back to good humour.'

'I doubt so, too, unless you go the right way to work with her; and that is not what you are doing now.'

'Why, what ought I to do, Elijah?'

'Do you want to break with her, George? Do you want to be off with Glory and on with milk-face?'

'No, I do not.'

'You are set on Glory still? You will cleave to her till naught but death shall you part, eh?'

'Naught else.'

'George! That other girl has good looks and money. Give up Mehalah, and hitch on to Phœbe. I know your mother will be best pleased if you do, and it will suit your interests well. Glory has not a penny, Phœbe has her pockets lined. Take my word for it you can have milk-face for the asking, and now is your opportunity for breaking with Glory if you have a mind to do so.'

'But I have not, Elijah'

'What can Glory be to you, or you to Glory? She with her great heart, her stubborn will, her strong soul, and you—you—bah!'

'Elijah, say what you like, but I will hold to Glory till death us do part.'

'Your hand on it. You swear that.'

'Yes, I do. I want a wife who can row a boat, a splendid girl, the sight of whom lights up the whole heart.'

'I tell you Glory is not one for you. See how passionate she is, she blazes up in a moment, and then she is one to shiver you if you offend her. No, she needs a man of other stamp than you to manage her.'

'She shall be mine,' said George; 'I want no other.'

'This is your fixed resolve?'

'My fixed resolve.'

'For better for worse?'

'For better for worse, till death us do part.'

'Till death you do part,' Elijah jerked out a laugh. 'George, if you are not the biggest fool I have set eyes on for many a day, I am much mistaken.'

'Why so?'

'Because you are acting contrary to your interests. You are unfit for Glory, you do not now, you never will, understand her.'

'What do you mean?'

'You let the girl row away, offended, angry, eating out her heart, and you show no sign that you desire reconciliation.'

'I have though. I waved my hat to her, but she took no notice.'

'Waved your hat!' repeated Rebow, with

suppressed scorn. 'You never will read that girl's heart, and understand her moods. Oh you fool! you fool! straining your arms after the unapproachable, unattainable star! If she were mine——' he stamped and clenched his fists.

'But she is not going to be yours, Elijah,' said George with a careless laugh.

'No, of course not,' said Elijah, joining in the laugh. 'She is yours till death you do part.'

'Tell me, what have I done wrong?' asked De Witt.

'There—you come to me, after all, to interpret the writing for you. It is there, written in letters of fire, Mene, mene, tekel, Upharsin! Thou art weighed in the balance and found wanting, and this night shall thy kingdom be taken from thee and given to——'

'Elijah, I do not understand this language. What ought I to do to regain Mehalah's favour?'

'You must go after her. Do you not feel it in every fibre, that you must, you mud-blood? Go after her at once. She is now at home, sitting alone, brooding over the offence, sore at your suffering her to be insulted without making

remonstrance. Her wrong will grow into a mountain in her heart unless it be rooted up to-night. Her pride will flame up as her passion dies away, and she will not let you speak to her another tender word. She will hate and despise you. The little crack will split into a wide chasm. I heard her call you a white-livered coward.'

'She did; you need not repeat it. She will be sorry when she is cool.'

'That is just it, George. As soon as passion abates, her generous heart will turn to self-reproach, and she will be angry with herself for what she has done. She will accuse herself with having been violent, with having acted unworthily of her dignity, with having grown in too great a heat about a worthless doll. She will be vexed with herself, ashamed of herself, unable in the twilight of her temper to excuse herself. Perhaps she is now in tears. But this mood will not last. To-morrow her pride will have returned in strength, she will think over her wrongs and harden herself in stubbornness; she will know that the world condemns her, and she will retire into herself in defiance of the world. Look up at the sky. Do you see, there

is Charles' Wain, and there is Cassiopæa's Chair. There the Serpent and there the Swan. I can see every figure plain, but your landsman rarely can. So I can see every constellation in the dark heaven of Mehalah's soul, but you cannot. You would be wrecked if you were to sail by it. Now, George, take Glory while she is between two moods, or lose her for ever. Go after her at once, George, ask her forgiveness, blame yourself and your mother, blame that figure-head miss, and she will forgive you frankly, at once. She will fall on your neck and ask your pardon for what she has done.'

'I believe you are right,' said De Witt, musing.

'I know I am. As I have been working in my forge, I have watched the flame on the hearth dance and waver to the clinking of the hammer. There was something in the flame, I know not what, which made it wince or flare, as the blows fell hard or soft. So there are things in Nature respond to each other without your knowing why it is, and in what their sympathy consists. So I know all that passes in Mehalah's mind. I feel my own soul dance and taper to her pulses. If you had not been a fool, George, you would already

have been after her. What are you staying for now?'

'My mother; what will she say?'

'Do you care for her more than for Glory? If you think of her now, you lose Glory for ever. Once more I ask you, do you waver? Are you inclined to forsake Mehalah for milk-face?'

'I am not,' said De Witt impatiently; 'why do you go on with this? I have said already that Glory is mine.'

'*Unless* death you do part.'

'*Till* death us do part, is what I said.'

'Then make haste. An hour hence the Ray house will be closed, and the girl and her mother in bed.'

'I will get my boat and row thither at once.'

'You need not do that. I have my boat here, jump in. We will each take an oar, and I will land you on the Ray.'

'You take a great interest in my affairs.'

'I take a very great interest in them,' said Rebow dryly.

'Lead the way, then.'

'Follow me.'

Rebow walked forward, over the shingle towards his boat, then suddenly turned, and asked in

a suppressed voice, 'Do you know whither you are going?'

'To the Ray.'

'To the Ray, of course. Is there anyone on the Hard?'

'Not a soul. Had I not better go to my mother before I start and say that I am going with you?'

'On no account. She will not allow you to go to the Ray. You know she will not.'

De Witt was not disposed to dispute this.

'You are sure,' asked Rebow again, 'that there is no one on the Hard. No one sees you enter my boat. No one sees you push off with me. No one sees whither we go.'

'Not a soul.'

'Then here goes!' Elijah Rebow thrust the boat out till she floated, sprang in and took his oar. De Witt was already oar in hand on his seat.

'The red curtain is over the wnidow at the Leather Bottle,' said George. 'No signalling to-night, the schooner is in the offing.'

'A red signal. It may mean more than you understand.'

They rowed on.

'Is there a hand on that crimson pane,' asked Rebow in a low tone, 'with the fingers dipped in fire, writing?'

'Not that I can see.'

'Nor do you see the writing, Mene, mene tekel, Upharsin.'

'You jest, Elijah!'

'A strange jest. Perhaps the writing is in the vulgar tongue, thou art weighed and found wanting, feeble fool, and thy kingdom is taken from thee, and given to ME.'

Mehalah sat by the hearth, on the floor, in the farm-house at the Ray. Her mother was abed and asleep. The girl had cast aside the cap and thrown off her jersey. Her bare arms were folded on her lap; and the last flicker of the red embers fell on her exposed and heaving bosom.

Elijah Rebow on the Hard at Mersea had read accurately the workings and transitions in the girl's heart. Precisely that was taking place which he had described. The tempest of passion had roared by, and now a tide of self-reproach rose and overflowed her soul. She was aware that she had acted wrongly, that without adequate cause she had given way to an outburst of blind fury.

Phœbe was altogether too worthless a creature for her jealousy, too weak to have been subjected to such treatment. Her anger against George had expired. He did well to be indignant with her. It was true he had not rebuked Phœbe nor restrained his mother, but the reason was clear. He was too forbearing with women to offend them, however frivolous and intemperate they might be. He had relied on the greatness of his Glory's heart to stand above and disregard these petty storms.

She had thrown off her boots and stockings, and sat with her bare feet on the hearth. The feet moved nervously in rhythm to her thoughts. She could not keep them still. Her trouble was great. Tears were not on her cheeks; in this alone was Elijah mistaken. Her dark eyes were fixed dreamily on the dying fire—they were like the marsh-pools with the will-o'-the-whisp in each. They did not see the embers, they looked through the iron fireback, and the brick wall, over the saltings, over the water, into infinity.

She loved George. Her love for him was the one absorbing passion of her life. She loved her mother, but no one else—only her and George. She had no one else to love. She was without

relations. She had been brought up without playfellows on that almost inaccessible islet, only occasionally visiting Mersea, and then only for an hour. She had seen and known nothing of the world save the world of morass. She had mixed with no life, save the life of the flocks on the Ray, of the fishes and the seabirds. Her mind hungered for something more than the little space of the Ray could supply. Her soul had wings and sought to spread them and soar away, whither, however she did not know. She had a dim prevision of something better than the sordid round of common cares which made up the life she knew.

With a heart large and full of generous impulses, she had spent her girlhood without a recognition of its powers. She felt that there was a voice within which talked in a tongue other from that which struck her ears each day, but what that language was, and what the meaning of that voice, she did not know. She had met with De Witt. Indeed they had known each other, so far as meeting at rare intervals went, for many years; she had not seen enough of him to know him as he really was, she therefore loved him as she idealised him. The great cretaceous sea was full of dissolved silex penetrating the waters, seeking

to condense and solidify. But there was nothing in the ocean then save twigs of weed and chips of shells, and about them that hardest of all elements drew together and grew to adamant. The soul of Mehalah was some such vague sea full of ununderstood, unestimated elements, seeking their several centres for precipitation, and for want of better, condensing about straws. To her, George de Witt was the ideal of all that was true and manly. She was noble herself, and her ideal was the perfection of nobility. She was rude indeed, and the image of her worship was rough hewn, but still with the outline and carriage of a hero. She could not, she would not, suppose that George de Witt was less great than her fancy pictured.

The thought of life with him filled her with exultation. She could leap up, like the whooper swan, spread her silver wings, and shout her song of rapture and of defiance, like a trumpet. He would open to her the gates into that mysterious world into which she now only peeped, he would solve for her the perplexities of her troubled soul, he would lead her to the light which would illumine her eager mind.

Nevertheless she was ready to wait patiently the realisation of her dream. She was in no

hurry. She knew that she could not live in the same house or boat with George's mother. She could not leave her own ailing mother, wholly dependent on herself. Mehalah contentedly tarried for what the future would unfold, with that steady confidence in the future that youth so generally enjoys.

The last embers went out, and all was dark within. No sound was audible, save the ticking of the clock, and the sigh of the wind about the eaves and in the thorntrees. Mehalah did not stir. She dreamed on with her eyes open, still gazing into space, but now with no marsh fires in the dark orbs. The grey night sky and the stars looked in at the window at her.

Suddenly, as she thus sat, an inexpressible distress came over her, a feeling as though George were in danger, and were crying to her for help. She raised herself on the floor, and drew her feet under her, and leaning her chin on her fingers listened. The wind moaned under the door; everything else was hushed.

Her fear came over her like an ague fit. She wiped her forehead, there were cold drops beading it. She turned faint at heart; her pulse stood still. Her soul seemed straining, drawn as

by invisible attraction, and agonised because the gross body restrained it. She felt assured that she was wanted. She must not remain there. She sprang to her feet and sped to the door, unbolted it and went forth. The sky was cloudless, thick strewn with stars. Jupiter glowed over Mersea Isle. A red gleam was visible, far away at the 'City.' It shone from the tavern window, a coloured star set in ebony. She went within again. The fire was out. Perhaps this was the vulgar cause of the strange sensation. She must shake it off. She went to her room and threw herself on the bed. Again, as though an icy wave washed over her, lying on a frozen shore, came that awful fear, and then, again, that tension of her soul to be free, to fly somewhere, away from the Ray, but whither she could not tell.

Where was George? Was he at home? Was he safe? She tried in vain to comfort herself with the thought that he ran no danger, that he was protected by her talisman. She felt that without an answer to these questions she could not rest, that her night would be a fever dream.

She hastily drew on her jersey and boots; she slipped out of the house, unloosed her punt, and

shot over the water to Mersea. The fleet was silent, but as she flew into the open channel she could hear the distant throb of oars on rowlocks, away in the dark, out seaward. She heard the screech of an owl about the stacks of a farm near the waterside. She caught as she sped past the Leather Bottle muffled catches of the nautical songs trolled by the topers within.

She met no boat, she saw no one. She ran her punt on the beach and walked to the 'Pandora,' now far above the water. The ladder was still down ; therefore George was not within. 'Who goes there?' asked the voice of Mrs. De Witt. 'Is that you, George? Are you coming home at last? Where have you been all this while?'

Mehalah drew back. George was not only not there, but his mother knew not where he was.

The cool air and the exercise had in the mean time dissipated Mehalah's fear. She argued with herself that George was in the tavern, behind the red curtain, remaining away from his mother's abusive tongue as long as he might. His boat lay on the Hard. She saw it, with the oars in it. He was therefore not on the water ; he was on

land, and on land he was safe. He wore the medal about his neck, against his heart.

How glad and thankful she was that she had given him the precious charm that guarded from all danger save drowning.

She rowed back to the Ray, more easy in her mind, and anchored her punt. She returned cautiously over the saltings, picking her way by the starlight, leaping or avoiding the runnels and pools, now devoid of water, but deep in mud most adhesive and unfathomable.

She felt a little uneasy lest her mother should have awoke during her absence, and missed her daughter. She entered the house softly; the door was without a lock, and merely hasped, and stole to her mother's room. The old woman was wrapt in sleep, and breathing peacefully.

Mehalah drew off her boots, and seated herself again by the hearth. She was not sleepy. She would reason with herself, and account for the sensation that had affected her.

Hark! she heard some one speak. She listened attentively with a flutter at her heart. It was her mother. She stole back on tiptoe to her. The old woman was dreaming, and talking in her

sleep. She had her hands out of bed together and parted them, and waved them, 'No, Mehalah, no! Not George! not George!' she gave emphasis with her hand, then suddenly grasped her daughter's wrist, 'But Elijah!' Next moment her grasp relaxed, and she slept calmly, apparently dreamlessly again.

Mehalah went back.

It was strange. No sooner was she in her place by the hearth again than the same distress came over her. It was as though a black cloud had swept over her sky and blotted out every light, so that neither sun, nor moon, nor star appeared, as though she were left drifting without a rudder and without a compass in an unknown sea, under murky night with only the phosphorescent flash of the waves about, not illumining the way but intensifying its horror. It was as though she found herself suddenly in some vault, in utter, rayless blackness, knowing neither how she came there nor whether there was a way out.

Oppressed by this horror, she lifted her eyes to the window, to see a star, to see a little light of any sort. What she there saw turned her to stone.

At the window, obscuring the star's rays, was

the black figure of a man. She could not see the face, she saw only the shape of the head, and arms, and hands spread out against the panes. The figure stood looking in and at her.

Her eyes filmed over, and her head swam.

She heard the casement struck, and the tear of the lead and tinkle of broken glass on the brick floor, and then something fell at her feet with a metallic click.

When she recovered herself, the figure was gone, but the wind piped and blew chill through the rent lattice.

How many minutes passed before she recovered herself sufficiently to rise and light a candle she never knew, nor did it matter. When she had obtained a light she stooped with it, and groped upon the floor.

* * * * *

Mrs. Sharland was awakened by a piercing scream.

She sprang from her bed and rushed into the adjoining room. There stood Mehalah, in the light of the broken candle lying melting and flaring on the floor, her hair fallen about her shoulders, her face the hue of death, her lips

bloodless, her eyes distended with terror, gazing on the medal of Paracelsus, which she held in her hand, the sea-water dripping from the wet riband wound about her fingers.

'Mother! Mother! He is drowned. I have seen him. He came and returned me this.'

Then she fell senseless on the floor, with the medal held to her heart.

CHAPTER VIII.

WHERE IS HE?

If there had been excitement on the Hard at Mersea on the preceding day when the schooner anchored off it, there was more this morning. The war-vessel had departed no one knew whither, and nobody cared. The bay was full of whiting; the waters were alive with them, and the gulls were flickering over the surface watching, seeing, plunging. The fishermen were getting their boats afloat, and all appliances ready for making harvest of that fish which is most delicious when fresh from the water, most flat when out of it a few hours.

Down the side of the 'Pandora' tumbled Mrs. De Witt, her nose sharper than usual, but her cap more flabby. She wore a soldier's jacket, bought second-hand at Colchester. Her face was of a warm complexion, tinctured with rum and wrath. She charged into the midst of the fishermen, asking in a loud imperative tone for her son.

To think that after the lesson delivered him last week, the boy should have played truant again! The world was coming to a pretty pass. The last trumpet might sound for aught Mrs. De Witt cared, and involve mankind in ruin, for mankind was past 'worriting' about.

George had defied her, and the nautical population of the 'City' had aided and abetted him in his revolt.

'This is what comes of galiwanting,' said Mrs. De Witt; 'first he galiwants Mehalah, and then Phœbe. No good ever came of it. I'd pass a law, were I king, against it, but that smuggling in love would go on as free under it as smuggling in spirits. Young folks now-a-days is grown that wexing and wicious—— Where is my George?' suddenly laying hold of Jim Morell.

The old sailor jumped as if he had been caught by a revenue officer.

'Bless my life, Mistress! You did give me a turn. What is it you want? A pinch of snuff?'

'I want my George,' said the excited mother. 'Where is he skulking to?'

'How should I know?' asked Morell, 'he is big enough to look after himself.'

'He is among you,' said Mrs. De Witt; 'I

know you have had him along with a party of you at the Leather Bottle yonder. You men get together, and goad the young on into rebellion against their parents.'

'I know nothing about George. I have not even seen him.'

'I've knitted his guernseys and patched his breeches these twenty years, and now he turns about and deserts me.'

'Tom!' shouted Morell to a young fisherman, 'have you seen George De Witt this morning?'

'No, I have not, Jim.'

'Oh, you young fellows!' exclaimed the old lady, loosing her hold on the elder sailor, and charging among and scattering the young boatmen. 'Where is my boy? What have you done with him that he did not come home last night, and is nowhere wisible?'

'He went to the Musset's last evening, Mistress. We have not set eyes on him since.'

'Oh! he went there did he? Galiwanting again!' She turned about and rushed over the shingle towards the grocery, hardware, drapery, and general store.

Before entering that realm of respectability,

Mrs. De Witt assumed an air of consequence and gravity.

She reduced her temper under control, and with an effort called up an urbane smile on her hard features when saluting Mrs. Musset who stood behind the counter.

'Can I serve you with anything, ma'am?' asked the mother of Phœbe, with cold self-possession.

'I want my George.'

'We don't keep him in stock.'

'He was here last night.'

'Do you suppose we kept him here the night? Are you determined to insult us, madam? You have been drinking, and have forgot yourself and where you are. We wish to see no more of your son. My Phœbe is not accustomed to demean herself by association with cannibals. It is unfortunate that she should have stepped beyond her sphere yesterday, but she has learned a lesson by it which will be invaluable for the future. I do not know, I do not care, whether the misconduct was that of your son or of your daughter-in-law. Birds of a feather flock together, and lambs don't consort with wolves. I beg, madam, that it be an understood matter between the families that, ex-

cept in the way of business, as tobacco, sugar, currants, or calico, intimacy must cease.'

'Oh indeed!' exclaimed Mrs. De Witt, the colour mottling her cheek. 'You mean to insinuate that our social grades are so wery different.'

'Providence, madam, has made distinctions in human beings as in currants. Some are all fruit, and some half gravel.'

'You forget,' said Mrs. De Witt, 'that I was a Rebow—a Rebow of Red Hall. It was thence I inherit the blood in my weins and the bridge of my nose.'

'And that was pretty much all you did inherit from them,' observed Mrs. Musset. 'Much value they must be to you, as you have nothing else to boast of.'

'Oh, indeed, Mistress Musset!'

'Indeed, Mistress De Witt!' with a profound curtsey.

Mrs. De Witt attempted an imitation, but having been uninstructed in deportment as a child, and inexperienced in riper years, she got her limbs entangled, and when she had arrived at a sitting posture was unable to extricate herself with ease.

In attempting to recover her erect position

she precipitated herself against a treacle barrel and upset it. A gush of black saccharine matter spread over the floor.

'Where is my son?' shouted Mrs. De Witt, her temper having broken control.

'You shall pay for the golden syrup,' said Mrs. Musset.

'Golden syrup!' jeered Mrs. De Witt, 'common treacle, the cleanings of the niggers' feet that tread out the sugar-cane.'

'It shall be put down to you!' cried the mistress of the store, defying her customer across the black river. 'I will have a summons out against you for the syrup.'

'And I will have a search-warrant for my son.'

'I have not got him. I should be ashamed to keep him under my respectable roof.'

'What is this disturbance about?' asked Mr. Musset, coming into the shop with his pipe.

'I want my son,' cried the incensed mother. 'He has not been seen since he came here last night. What have you done to him?'

'He is not here, Mistress. He only remained a few minutes to inquire after Phœbe, and then he left. We have not seen him since. Go to the

Leather Bottle; you will probably find him there.'

The advice was reasonable; and having discharged a parting shot at Mrs. Musset, the bereaved mother departed and took her way to the quaint old inn by the waterside, entitled the Leather Bottle.

Mrs. De Witt pushed the door open and strode in. No one was there save the host, Isaac Mead. He knew nothing of George's whereabouts. He had not seen him or heard him spoken of. Mrs. De Witt having entered, felt it incumbent on her to take something for the good of the house.

The host sat opposite her at the table.

'Where can he be?' asked Mrs. De Witt. 'The boy cannot be lost.'

'Have you searched everywhere?'

'I have asked the lads, they either know nothing, or won't tell. I have been to the Musset's. They pretend they have not seen him since last night.'

'Perhaps he rowed off somewhere.'

'His boat is on the Hard.'

'Do not bother your head about him,' said the host with confidence, 'he will turn up. Mark my words. I say he will certainly turn up, perhaps

not when you want him, or where you expect him, but he assuredly will reappear. I have had seven sons, and they got scattered all over the world, but they have all turned up one after another, and,' he added sententiously, 'the world is bigger than Mersea. It is nothing to be away for twelve or fourteen hours. Lads take no account of time, they do not walue it any more than they walue good looks. We older folks do; we hold to that which is slipping from us. When we was children, we thought we could deal with time as with the sprats. We draw in all and throw what we can't consume away. At last we find we have spoiled our fishing, and we must use larger meshes in our net. I will tell you another thing, Mistress,' continued the host, who delighted to moralise, 'time is like a clock, when young it goes slow, and when old it gallops. When you and I was little, we thought a day as long as now we find a year. As we grew older years went faster; and the older we wax the greater the speed with which time spins by; till at last it passes with a whisk and a flash, and that is eternity.'

'He cannot be drowned,' said Mrs. De Witt. 'That would be too ridiculous'

'It would, just about.' After a moment's consideration Isaac added, 'I heard that Elijah Rebow was on the Hard last night, maybe your George is gone off with him.'

'Not likely, Isaac. I and Elijah are not on good terms. My father left me nothing. Elijah took all after his parents, and I did not get a penny.'

'You know we have war with foreigners,' observed the publican. 'Now I observe that everything in this world goes by contraries. When there's peace abroad, there is strife at home, and *vice versâ*. There was a man-of-war in the bay yesterday. I should not wonder if that put it into George's head to be a man-of-peace on land. When you want to estimate a person's opinions, first ask what other folks are saying round him, and take the clean contrary, and you hit the bull's-eye. If you see anything like to draw a man in one direction, look the opposite way, and you will find him. There was pretty strong intimation of war yesterday with the foreigners, then you may be dead certain he took a peaceful turn in his perwerse vein, and went to patch up old quarrels with Elijah.'

'It is possible,' said Mrs. De Witt. 'I will row to Red Hall and find out.'

'Have another glass before you go,' said the landlord. 'Never hurry about anything. If George be at his cousin's he will turn up in time. There is more got by waiting than by worrying.'

'But perhaps he is not there.'

'Then he is elsewhere.'

'He may be drowned.'

'He will turn up. Drowned or not, he will turn up. I never knew boys to fail. If he were a girl it would be different. You see it is so when they drown. A boy floats face upwards, and a girl with her face down. It is so also in life. If a girl strays from home, she goes to the bottom like a plummet, but a boy on the contrary goes up like a cork.'

Mrs. De Witt so far took Isaac Mead's advice that she waited at her home till afternoon. But as George did not return, she became seriously uneasy, not so much for him as for herself. She did not for a moment allow that any harm had befallen him, but she imagined this absence to be a formal defiance of her authority. Such a revolt was not to be overlooked. In Mrs. De Witt's opinion no man was able to stand alone, he must

fall under female government or go to the dogs. Deliberate bachelors were, in her estimation, god-forsaken beings, always in scrapes, past redemption. She had ruled her husband, and he had submitted with a meekness that ought to have inherited the earth. George had been always docile. She had bored docility into him with her tongue, and hammered it into him with her fist.

The idea came suddenly on her,—What if he had gone to the war schooner and enlisted? but was dismissed as speedily as impossible. Tales of ill-treatment in the Navy were rife among the shoremen. The pay was too small to entice a youth who owned a vessel, a billyboy, and oyster pans. He might do well in his trade, he must fare miserably in the Navy. Captain MacPherson had indeed invited George and others to follow him, but not one had volunteered.

She determined at last, in her impatience, to visit Red Hall, and for that purpose she got into the boat. Mrs. De Witt was able to row as well as a man. She did not start for Red Hall without reluctance. She had not been there since her marriage, kept away by her resentment. Elijah had made no overtures to her for reconciliation,

had never invited her to revisit her native place, and her pride prevented her from making first advances. She had been cut off by her father, the family had kept aloof from her, and this had rankled in her heart. True, Elijah's father and mother were dead, and he was not mixed up in the first contentions; but he had inherited money which she considered ought to have fallen to her.

She was, however, anxious to see the old place again. Her young life there had not been happy; quite the reverse, for her father had been brutal, and her mother Calvinistic and sour. Yet Red Hall was, after all, her old home; its marshes were the first landscape on which her eyes had opened, its daisies had made her first necklaces, its bullrushes her first whips, its seawall the boundary of her childish world. It was a yearning for a wider, less level world, which had driven her in a rash moment into the arms of Moses De Witt.

The tide was out, so Mrs. De Witt was obliged to land at the point near the windmill. She walked thence on the seawall. She knew that wall well, fragrant with sovereign wood in summer, and rank with sea spinach. The aster blooming

time was past, and the violet petals had fallen off, leaving only the yellow centres.

There, before her, like a stranded ark, was the old red house, unaltered, lonely, without a bush or tree to screen it.

The cattle stood browsing in the pasture as of old. In the marsh was a pond, a flight of wild fowl was wheeling round it, as in the autumns long ago. There was the little creek where her punt had lain, the punt in which she had been sometimes sent to Mersea to buy groceries for her mother.

The hard crust about the heart of Mrs. De Witt began to break, and the warm feeling within to ooze through. Gentler sentiments began to prevail. She would not take her son by the ears and bang his head, if she should find him at Red Hall. She would forgive him in a Christian spirit, and grant his dismissal with an innocuous curse.

She walked straight into the house. Elijah was crouched in his leather chair, with his head on one side, asleep. She stood over him and contemplated his unattractive face in silence, till he suddenly started, and exclaimed, 'Who is here? Who is this?'

Next moment he had recognised his visitor.

'So you are come, Aunt. You have not honoured me before. Will you have some whisky?'

'Thank you, Elijah, thank you. I am dry with rowing. But how come you to be asleep at this time of day? Were you out after ducks last night?'

'No, I was not out. I lay abed. I went to bed early.'

'Elijah, where is my son?'

He started, and looked at her suspiciously.

'How am I to know?'

'I cannot find him anywhere,' said the mother. 'I fear the boy has levanted. I may have been a little rough with him, but it was for his good. You cannot clean a deck with whiting, you must take holystone to the boards, and it is so with children. If you are not hard, you get off no edges, if you want to polish them, you must be gritty yourself. I doubt the boy is off.'

'What makes you think so?'

'I have not seen him. Nobody at Mersea has seen him. Have you?'

'Not since last night.'

'You saw him then?'

'Yes, he was on the beach going to Mehalah.'

'Galiwanting!' exclaimed Mrs. De Witt. 'Oh what wickedness comes of galiwanting!' Then, recovering herself, 'But how could he get there? His boat was left on the Hard!'

'I suppose he went by land. He said something to that effect. You see the tide would have been out if he purposed to stay some time.'

'But what should make him go to the Ray? He had seen Mehalah on his boat.'

'He said there had been a quarrel, and he was bent on making it up. Go and look for him on the Ray. If he is not back on your boat already, you will find him, or hear of him, there.'

'Oh the worries to parents that come of galliwanting!' moaned Mrs. De Witt, 'none who have not experienced can tell. Do not stay me, Elijah. Dear sackalive! I must go home. I dare say the boy is now on the "Pandora," trying to look innocent.' She rubbed her hands, and her eyes glistened. 'By cock!' she exclaimed, 'I would not be he.' She was out of the room, without a farewell to her nephew, down the steps, away over the flat to the seawall and her boat, her heart palpitating with anger.

It was late in the afternoon before Mrs. De

Witt got back to Mersea. She ascended her ladder and unlocked the hatches. She looked about her. No George was on deck. She returned to the shore and renewed her enquiries. He had not been seen. No doubt he was still galivanting at the Ray. The uncertainty became unendurable. She jumped into her boat once more, and rowed to the island inhabited by Glory and her mother.

With her nose high in the air, her cap-frills quivering, she stepped out of the skiff. She had donned her military coat, to add to her imposing and threatening aspect.

The door of the house was open. She stood still and listened. She did not hear George's voice. She waited; she saw Mehalah moving in the room. Once the girl looked at her, but there was neither recognition nor lustre in her eyes. Mrs. De Witt made a motion towards her, but Glory did not move to meet her in return.

As she stepped over the threshold, Mrs. Sharland, who was seated by the fire, turned and observed her. The widow rose at once with a look of distress in her face, and advanced towards her, holding out her hand.

'Where is George?' asked Mrs. De Witt,

ignoring the outstreched palm, in a hard, impatient tone.

'George!' echoed Mehalah, standing still, 'George is dead.'

'What nonsense!' said Mrs. De Witt, catching the girl by the shoulder and shaking her.

'I saw him. He is dead.' She quivered like an aspen.

The blood had ebbed behind her brown skin. Her eyes looked in Mrs. De Witt's face with a flash of agony in them.

'He came and looked in at the window at me, and cast me back the keepsake I had given him, and which he swore not to part with while life lasted.'

'Dear sackalive!' exclaimed Mrs. De Witt; 'the girl is dreaming or demented. What is the meaning of all this, Mistress Sharland?'

'Last night,' explained the widow, 'as Mehalah was sitting here in the dark, some one came to the window, stove it in,—look how the lead is torn, and the glass fallen out—and cast at the feet of Mehalah a medal she had given George on Thursday. She thinks,' added the old woman in a subdued tone, 'that what she saw was his spirit.'

Mrs. De Witt was awed. She was not a

woman without superstition, but she was not one to allow a supernatural intervention till all possible prosaic explanations had been exhausted.

'Is this Gospel truth?' she asked.

'It is true,' answered the widow.

'Did you see the face, Glory? Are you sure that what you saw was George?'

'I did not see the face. I saw only the figure. But it was George. It could have been no other. He alone had the medal, and he brought it back to me.'

'You see,' explained the widow Sharland, 'the coin was an heirloom; it might not go out of the family.'

'I see it all,' exclaimed Mrs. De Witt. 'Gali-wanting again! He came to return the keepsake to Mehalah, because he wanted to break with her and take on with another.'

'No, never!' exclaimed Mehalah vehemently. 'He could not do it. He was as true to me as I am to him. He could not do it. He came to tell me that all was over.'

'Dear sackalive!' said Mrs. De Witt, 'you don't know men as I do. You have had no more experience of them than you have of kangaroos. I will not believe he is dead.'

'He is dead,' Mehalah burst forth with fierce vehemence. 'He is drowned, he is not false. He is dead, he is dead.'

'I know better,' said Mrs. De Witt in a low tone to herself as she bit her thumb. 'That boy is galiwanting somewhere; the only question to me is Where. By cock! I'd give a penny to know.'

CHAPTER IX.

IN MOURNING.

A MONTH passed, and no tidings whatever of George De Witt had reached his mother or Mehalah. The former constantly expected news of her son. She would not believe in his death, and was encouraged in her opinion by Isaac Mead. But Mehalah had never entertained hope; she did not look for news, she knew that George was drowned.

His body had not been found. His disappearance had been altogether mysterious. Mrs. De Witt used every effort to trace him, but failed. From the moment the door of the Mussets had closed upon him, no one had seen him. With the closing of that door the record of his life had closed. He had passed as completely beyond pursuit as though he had passed through the gate of death.

There was but one possible way of accounting

for his disappearance, and it was that at which public opinion arrived. He had gone round by the Strood from Mersea to reach the Ray, which was on that side accessible, but with difficulty, and occasionally only by land, had lost his way among the saltmarshes in the night, had fallen into one of the myriad creeks that traverse this desolate region, and had been engulfed in the ooze. The sea will give up her dead after a storm and with the tide, but the slime of the marshes never.

Mehalah made no attempt to account for the disappearance of George; it was sufficient for her that he was lost to her for ever. But his mother made enquiries when selling shrimps along the Colchester road, and on the island. He had nowhere been seen. He had not visited the Rose.

It was Elijah Rebow who finally brought Mrs. De Witt to admit that her son was entirely lost to her.

He visited her in November. She was surprised and pleased to see him. Since the disappearance of George, Mrs. De Witt had taken more vigorously than before to grog. Her feelings needed solace, and she found it in her glass. Perhaps the presence of George had acted as a restraint on his mother. She had not wished

him to suppose her a habitual tippler. Her libations had been performed when he was away, or under the excuse of stomachics. On the subject of her internal arrangements, discomforts, and requirements, Mrs. De Witt had afforded her son information more copious than interesting. Her digestion sympathised with all the convulsions then shaking Europe. Revolutions were brought about there by the most ordinary edibles, and were always to be reduced by spirituous drinkables.

The topic of her internal economy, when introduced by Mrs. De Witt, always prefaced a resolve to try a drop of cordial. Now that George was gone, Mrs. De Witt brooded over her loss at home, stirring her glass as if it were the mud of the marshes, and she hoped to turn George up out of the syrup of the dissolving sugar.

Mrs. De Witt had laid aside her red coat, as inappropriate to her forlorn condition. The month of October had seen a sad deterioration in the mistress of the 'Pandora.' Her funds had been fast ebbing. The bread-winner was gone, and the rum-drinker had obtained fresh excuse for deep potations. There were fish in the sea to be

caught, but he that had netted them was now under the mud. Things could not go on thus for ever.

Mrs. De Witt was musing despondingly over her desperate position, when Elijah appeared above the hatchway and descended to the cabin.

Mrs. De Witt had stuck a black bow in her mob cap, as a symbol of her woe. She hardly needed to hang out the flag, for her whole face and figure betokened distress. It cannot be said that her maternal bowels yearned after her son out of love for him so much as out of solicitude for herself. She naturally grieved for her 'poor boy,' but her grief for him was largely tinctured with anxiety for her own future. How should she live? On what subsist? She had her husband's old hull as a home, and a fishing smack, and a rowing boat. There was some money in the box, but not much. 'There's been no wasteful outlay over a burying,' said Mrs. De Witt. 'That is a good job.'

But, as already said, Mrs. De Witt only yielded reluctantly to the opinion that her boy was drowned. She held resolutely in public to this view for reasons she confided to herself over her rum. 'It is no use dropping a pint of money in

dragging for the body, and burying it when you've got it. To my notion that is laying out five pound to have the satisfaction of spending another five. George was a gentleman,' she said with pride. 'If he was to go from his pore mother, he went as cheap from her as a lad could do it.'

Another reason why she refused to believe in his death was characteristic of the illogicality of her sex. This she announced to Rebow. 'You have it in a nutshell. How can the poor boy be drowned? For, if so, what is to become of me, and I a widow?'

'Mrs. De Witt,' said Rebow, helping himself to some rum, 'you may as well make your mind easy on this point. If George be not dead where can he be?'

'That I do not take on myself to say.'

'He is nowhere on Mersea, is he?'

'Certainly not.'

'He did not go along the Colchester road beyond the Strood?'

'No, or I should have heard of him.'

'Moreover, he told me he purposed going to the Ray.'

'To be sure he did.'

'And he never reached the Ray.'

'No, for certain.'

'Then it is obvious he must have been lost between Mersea and the Ray.'

'There is something in what you say, Elijah; there is what we may term argument in it.'

'There was a reason why he should go to the Ray.'

'I suppose there was.'

'He had quarrelled with Glory, and desired to make it up that night.'

'I know there had been a squall.'

'Then do not flatter yourself with false hopes. George is gone past recall; you and Glory must give him up for ever.'

Mrs. De Witt shook her head, wiped her eyes with the frill of her cap, looked sorrowfully into her glass and said, 'Pore me!'

'You are poor indeed,' said Elijah, 'but how poor I suspect rather than know. What have you got to live upon?'

'That is just it,' answered Mrs. De Witt; 'my head has been like the Swin light, a rewolving and a rewolving. But there is this difference, the Swin rewolves first light and then dark alternately, whereas in my head there has been naught rewolving but warious degrees of darkness.'

'What do you propose doing?'

'Well, I have an idea.' Mrs. De Witt hitched her chair nearer to her nephew, and breathed her idea and her spirit together into his ear. 'I think I shall marry.'

'You—!'

'Yes, I. Why not? There is the billyboy running to waste, rotting for want of use, crying out for a master to take her out fishing. There are as many fisherboys on shore as there are sharks in the ocean, ready to snap me up were I flung to them. I have felt them. They have been a nibbling round me already. Consider, Elijah! there is the "Pandora," good as a palace for a home, and the billyboy and the boat, and the nets, and the oyster garden, and then there is my experience to be thrown in *gratis*, and above all,' she raised herself, 'there is my person.'

Rebow laughed contemptuously.

'What have these boys of their own?' asked Mrs. De Witt laying down the proposition with her spoon. 'They have nothing, no more than the sea-cobs. They have naught to do but swoop down on whatever they can see, sprats, smelt, mullet, whiting, dabs, and when there is naught else, winkles. Their thoughts do not rise that

proudly to me, and I must stoop to them. I tell you what, Elijah, if I was to be raffled for, at a shilling a ticket, there would be that run among the boys for me, that I could make a fortune. But I won't demean myself to that. I shall choose the stoutest and healthiest among them, then I can send him out fishing, and he can earn me money, as did George, and so I shall be able to enjoy ease, if not opulence.'

'But suppose the lads decline the honour.'

'I should like to see the impertinence of the lad that did,' said Mrs. De Witt firmly. 'I have had experience with men, and I know them in and out that familiarly that I could find my way about their brains or heart, as you would about your marshes, in the dark. No, Elijah, the question is not will they have me, but whether I will be bothered with any more of the creatures. I will not unless I can help it. I will not unless the worst comes to the worst. But a woman must live, Elijah.'

'How much have you got for current expenses?'

'Only a few pounds.'

'There are five and twenty pounds owed you by the Sharlands. You are not going to let them have it as a present?'

'No, certain, I am not.'

'Do you expect to get it by waiting for it?'

'To tell you the truth, Elijah, I hadn't given that five and twenty pounds a thought. I will go over to the Ray and claim the money.'

'You will not get it.'

'I must have it.'

'They can not possibly pay.'

'But they shall pay. I want and will have my money.'

'Mehalah will pretend that George gave her the money.'

'No, she will not. She acknowledged the debt to me before George's face. She promised repayment as soon as she had sufficient.'

'If you do not seize on their goods, or some of them, you will never see the colour of the coin again.'

'I must and will have it.'

'Then follow my advice. Put in an execution. I will lend you my men. All you have to do is to give notice on this island when the sale is to be, get together sufficient to bid and buy, and you have your money. You must have an auction.'

'Can I do so, Elijah?'

'Of course you can. Go over to the Ray at

once and demand your money. If they decline to pay, allow them a week's grace, more if you like. I'll go with you, when the sale is to take place, and perhaps bid. We will have a Dutch auction.'

'By cock! I'll do it. I will go there right on end.'

At once, with her natural impetuosity, the old woman started. Before departing, however, to heighten her importance, and give authority and sternness to her appearance, she donned her red coat. In token of mourning she wrapped a black rag round her left arm. Over her cap she put a broad-brimmed battered straw hat, in front of which she affixed with a hair-pin the large black bow that had figured on her cap. Thus arrayed she entered her boat and rowed to the Ray.

The demand for the money filled Mrs. Sharland with dismay. It was a demand as unexpected as it was embarrassing. She and Mehalah were absolutely without the means of discharging the debt. They had, indeed, a few pounds by them, which had been intended to serve to carry them through the winter, and these they offered Mrs. De Witt, but she refused to receive a portion on account when she wanted the whole of the debt.

Mrs. Sharland entreated delay till spring, but

Mrs. De Witt was inexorable. She would allow no longer than a week. She departed, declaring that she would sell them up, unless the five and twenty pounds were produced.

Since the death or disappearance of George De Witt, Mehalah had gone about her usual work in a mechanical manner. She was in mourning also. But she did not exhibit it by a black bow on her cap or a sable rag round her arm, like the mother of the lost lad. She still wore her red cap, crimson kerchief and blue jersey. But the lustre was gone from her eyes, the bloom from her cheek, animation from her lips. There was no spring in her step, no lightness in her tone. The cow was milked as regularly as usual, and foddered as attentively as before. The house was kept as scrupulously clean, Mrs. Sharland ministered to with the same assiduity, but the imperiousness of Mehalah's nature had gone. The widow found to her astonishment that she was allowed to direct what was to be done, and that her daughter submitted without an objection.

It is the way with strong natures to allow their griefs no expression, to hide their sorrows and mask their wounds. Glory did not speak of George. She did not weep. She made no lamentation over his

loss ; more wonderful still in her mother's eyes, she uttered no reproaches against anyone for it. A weak nature always exhausts its troubles in reproaches of others ; a strong one eats out its own heart. Mehalah listened with a dull ear to her mother's murmurs, and made no response. Mrs. Sharland set her down as unfeeling. A feeble querulous woman like her was quite unable to measure the depth of her daughter's heart, and understand its working. The result was that she read them wrong, and took false soundings.

When her mother was in bed and asleep, then Mehalah sat at the hearth, or leaned at the window looking at the stars, hour by hour, immovable, uttering no sound, not building castles in the clouds, not weaving any schemes for her future, not hoping for anything, not imagining anything, but exhaling her pain. As the turned earth after the plough may be seen in a sudden frost to smoke, so was it with that wounded heart, it smoked, gave up its fever heat, and in silence and solitude cooled. There was something, which yet was no *thing*, to which her weary soul stretched, in dim unconsciousness. There was a communing without words, even without the thoughts which form into words, with that Unseen which is

yet so surely felt. It was the spirit—that infinite essence so mysteriously enclosed within bounds, in strange contradiction to its nature, asserting its nature and yearning for Infinity.

The human heart in suffering is like the parched soil in summer; when its sky is overcast and it cannot see beyond the cloud that lies low over it, then it must harbour its heat, and gape with fever. But, should a rent appear in the earth-born vaporous veil, through which it can look into unfathomable space, at once it radiates the ardour that consumes it, casts off the fever that consumes it, and drinks in, and is slaked by, the dew of heaven.

CHAPTER X.

STRUCK COLOURS.

WOMAN is the natural enemy of woman. When one woman is over thirty or plain, and the other is young or beautiful, the enmity on one side is implacable and unqualified by mercy. A woman can be heroically self-sacrificing and behave with magnificent generosity towards man, but not towards one of her own sex. She is like the pillar that accompanied the Israelites and confounded the Egyptians; she is cloud and darkness to these, but light and fire to those. She will remorselessly pursue, and vindictively torment a sister who offends by having a better profile and less age. No act of submission will blunt her spite, no deed of kindness sponge up her venom. There is but one unpardonable sin in the sight of Heaven; there are two in the eyes of a middle-aged woman, youth and beauty. She is unconscious of fatigue in the pursuit, and without compunction in the treat-

ment of the member of her sex who has sinned against her in one particular or other. The eternal laws of justice, the elementary principles of virtue, are set aside as inappropriate to the world of women. Generosity, charity, pity are unknown quantities in the feminine equation. As the Roman tyrant wished that mankind had but one neck which he might hack through, so woman would like that womankind had but one nose which she might put out of joint. Every woman is a kill-joy to every other woman, a discord in the universal harmony. Her ideal world is that of the bees, in which there is but one queen, and all other shes are stung to death. Eve was the only woman who tasted of happiness unalloyed, because in Eden she had no sisters.

The iron maid of Nuremberg was sweet and smiling externally, but a touch revealed the interior bristling with spikes, and the victim thrust into her embrace was only released a corpse to drop into an *oubliette*. All women are Nuremberg maidens, with more or fewer spikes, discovered perhaps by husbands, unsuspected by the rest of men, but known to all other women, who are scarred from their embraces.

Mehalah knew that no leniency was to be

looked for in Mrs. De Witt. She thought that lady exceptionally rigorous and exacting; she thought so because she knew nothing of the world. Her mother spent her breath in repinings that could not help, and in hopes which must be frustrated. The extremity of the danger roused Mehalah from her dreams. There was no pity to be expected from the creditor, and there was no means that she could see of defraying the debt. She considered and tried to find some road out of the difficulty, but could discover none. Now more than ever did she need the advice, if not the help, of him who was gone. There was nothing on the farm that could be sold without leaving them destitute of means of carrying it on and defraying the next half-year's rent. The cow, the ewes, her boat, were necessary to them. The furniture in the house was of little value, and it was impossible for her to transport it to Colchester for sale.

She sat thinking of the situation one evening over the fire opposite her mother, without uttering a word. Her hands with her knitting needles lay in her lap; she could not work, she was too fully engrossed in the cares which pressed on her.

Presently her mother roused her from her reverie, by saying, 'There is no help for it,

Mehalah, you must go to Wyvenhoe, and find out my cousin, Charles Pettican. He is my only relative left;—at least as far as I know, and him I have not seen for fifteen or sixteen years. I do not even know if he be yet alive. We haven't had a chance of meeting. I go nowhere, I am imprisoned on this island, and he is cut off from us by the river Colne. I see no way out of our trouble but that of borrowing money from him. He was a kind-hearted lively fellow when young, but what he is now that he is old I cannot tell. You must go and try what you can do with him. He is well off, and would not miss twenty pounds more than twenty pence.'

Mehalah greatly disliked the idea of going to a stranger, to one who, though a connection, was quite unknown to her, and begging a loan of him. It galled her pride and wounded her independence. It lowered her in her own eyes. She would rather have worked her fingers to the bone than so stoop, but no work of hers could raise twenty pounds in a week. The thought was altogether so intolerable to her, that she fought against it as long as she could. She would herself cheerfully have gone out of her home and left the farm rather than do this, but she was

obliged to consider her mother. She yielded at last most reluctantly; and with tears of mortification filling her eyes, and her cheeks burning with shame, she threw aside her customary costume, and dressed herself in dark blue cloth gown, white kerchief, and a bonnet, and took her way to Wyvenhoe. She had to walk some seven miles. Her road led her to the top of high ground overlooking the mouth of the Colne.

The blue water was dotted with sails. Beyond the river on a height rose from above trees the lofty tower of Brightlingsea. Up a winding creek she looked, and at the head could distinguish the grey priory of St. Osyth, then the seat of the Earl of Rochford, at the entrance to a noble park. She descended the hill, and by a ferry crossed the river to the village of Wyvenhoe.

On her walk she had mused over what she should say to Mr. Charles Pettican, without coming to any determination. Her mother had let fall some hints that her cousin had once been her fond admirer, but that they had been parted by cruel parents. Mrs. Sharland's reminiscences were rather vague, and not much reliance could be placed on them; however, Mehalah hoped there might be some truth in this, and that old

recollections might be stirred in the breast of Mr. Pettican, and stimulate him to generosity. The river was full of boats, and on the landing were a number of people. 'We're lively to-day,' said the ferryman who put her over, 'the regatta is on. It is late this season, but what with one thing and another, we couldn't have it earlier no way.'

'Will Mr. Pettican be there?'

'Lor bless you, no,' answered the man, 'that's impossible.'

Glory asked her way to the house of her mother's cousin. He was, or rather had been, a shipbuilder. He occupied a little compact wooden house painted white, on the outskirts of the village. It was a cheerful place. The shutters were after the French fashion, external, and painted emerald green. The roof was tiled, and looked very red, as though red ochred every morning by the housemaid after she had pipe-clayed the walls. Over the door of the house was a balcony with elaborate iron balustrades gilt, against these leaned two figure-heads, females, with very pink and white complexions, and no expression in their faces.

There was a sanded path led from the gate to

the door, and there were two green patches of turf, one on each side of it. In the centre of that on the left was another figure-head—a Medusa with flying serpent locks, but with a face as passionless and ordinary as that of a milliner's block. In the midst of the other plot rose a mast. On this day, when all Wyvenhoe was *en fête*, a flag ought properly to be flying from the mast. Every other in the village and on the water was adorned with its bunting, but that of Mr. Pettican alone ignored the festival.

As Mehalah ascended the walk, a gull with its wings clipped uttered a fierce scream, and rushing across the garden with outspread pinions, dashed at her foot with his sharp beak, and then falling back, threw out his breast, elevated his bill, and broke into a long succession of discordant yells, whoops, and gulps.

At the same moment one pane in the window on the right of the door opened, a little dry face peered through and nodded.

'If you're going to knock, don't. Come in, and make no noise about it. It's very kind. She's out.'

The gull made a second assault at Mehalah's foot.

'Kick him,' said the face; 'don't fear you will hurt him. He is as good as a watch dog. Open the door, and when you are in the hall turn to the right-hand.'

Then the pane was slammed to, and Mehalah turned the handle of the front door. She found herself in a narrow passage with a flight of very steep stairs before her, and a door on each hand. Over each of these on a bracket stood a ship fully rigged, with all her sail on.

She entered the room on the right as directed, and found herself in a little parlour with very white walls, and portraits of ships, some in worsted work on canvas, others painted in oils, others again in water-colours, covering the walls.

In the window, half sat, half reclined, an old man, with a scrubby grey head, a pair of very lively eyes, but with a trembling feeble mouth.

He wore very high shirt-collars, exceedingly stiff, and thick folds of black silk round his neck. His blue coat had a high black velvet collar. The little man seemed to draw his head in between his blinkers and beneath his coat-collar, and lose his face in his cravat, then at will to project his head from them, as though he were a tortoise, retiring into or emerging from his shell.

As Glory came in, the little wizzened face was scarce perceptible, save that the bright eyes peeped and twinkled at her from somewhere in a chaos of black velvet, blue cloth, white linen, and black silk; then all at once the head shot forward, and a cheery voice said, 'I can't rise to meet you, Mary,' he made at the same time a salutation with his hand, 'or I would throw myself at your feet. Glad to see you. How are you, Lizzy my dear.'

'My name is neither Mary nor Lizzy, but Mehalah.'

'Let it be Methusalah or Melchizedek, or what you like, it is all one to me. I don't care for the name you give a wine when it is good, I drink it and smack my lips, whether you call it Port, or Tarragona, or Roussillon; and I don't bother about a girl's name. If she is sweet and sunny, and bright and pretty as,'—he made a little bow and a great flourish of his hand as a salute, —'as you are, I see her and listen to her, and admire her.'

'My name's——'

'I have told you it don't matter. I never yet met with a girl's name that wasn't pretty, except one, and I thought that pretty once.'

'What name?'

'Admonition.'

'Why do you not like it.'

The little man looked out of the window, along the walls, then turned his head round and sighed. 'Never mind. Do you see that figure-head out there? It belonged to a wessel I built; she was called the "Medusa." Bad luck attended her. She was always fouling other wessels. She ran down a Frenchman once, but that was no matter, and she did the same by a Dutchman. Well at last she got such a character that I was forced to change her head and her name, but then she fared worse than before. Changing their names don't always mend wessels and women. Well!' with another sigh, 'we will leave unpleasant topics, and laugh and be jolly while we may. You haven't told me how you are. This is very kind of you to drop in on me. It is like old times; my halcyon days, as I think they call 'em. I haven't had such a wisit since,' he waved towards his flagstaff, 'since I lowered my flag.'

'But, sir,' said Mehalah, 'you must let me explain my purpose in coming here; and to do that, I must tell you who I am, and whence I come.'

'I don't want to hear it. I don't care a bit about it. Be jolly and gather the rosebuds while ye may. *She* ain't out for long, and we must be joyful at such opportunities as are afforded us. I know as well as you do why you have come. You have come in the goodness of your female heart to cheer a poor crippled wretch like me.'

'I did not know you were a cripple, sir!'

'You didn't. Give me my crutches. Look at this.' He placed his crutches under his arms, swung himself dexterously off his chair, and stumped round the room, dragging his lower limbs behind him, as though they did not belong to him. They were lifeless. When he returned to his seat he threw himself down. 'Now, Jemima, put up my legs on that chair. I can't stir them myself. I couldn't raise them an inch if you was to promise me a kiss for my pains. There, thank ye; now sit down and be jolly.'

'Sir,' said Mehalah, 'you remember my mother, Mistress Sharland.'

'What! Liddy Vince, pretty cousin Liddy! I should think I did remember her. Why, it is only the other day that she married.'

'I am her daughter, and my age is nineteen.'

'I haven't seen her for—well, never mind

how many years. Years don't tell on a man as they do on a woman; they mellow him, but wither her. So you are her daughter, are you? Stand round there by my feet where I can see you.'

He drew his head down among his clothes and peered at her from between his tall white collars. 'You are an uncommon fine girl,' he said, when his observation was completed, 'but not a bit like Liddy. You are more like her mother—she was the deuce of a splendid woman, such eyes, such hair—but she was a——' he hesitated, his courtesy forbade his saying what rose to the tongue.

'A gipsy;' Mehalah supplied the words.

'Well, she was, but she couldn't help it, you know. But that is not what I was about to say. I intended to observe that she was a—little before my time. She was old when I knew her, but I've heard what a beauty she was, and her eyes always remained large and noble, and her hair luxuriant. But women don't improve with age as does good port, and as do men. Well, now, tell me your name'

'Mehalah.'

'A regular Essex marshland name. I hope I shall remember it. But I have to carry so many

names of nice-looking girls in my head, and of ships I have built, that they run one another down, and I cannot be sure to recall them. My memory is not going. Don't suppose that. Why, bless your dear heart, I can remember everything your mother and I said to one another when we were sweet upon each other. That don't look like a failing memory, does it? But you see, as we go on in life, every day brings something more to remember, and so this head gets choke full. A babe a year old has some three hundred and sixty five things to recollect, that is if he remembers only one thing per diem, and a man of fifty has over eighteen million of things stuffed away in this little warehouse,' tapping his head; 'so he has to rummage and rout before he can find the particular article he wants. His memory don't go with age, but gets overchoked. Now, to change the topic, why haven't you been to see me before?'

'Sir! I could not. I did not know you, and you live a long way from the Ray. Mother can not walk so far.'

'And I can't neither, but not from age but from accident. So your mother can't walk a matter of seven miles. Dear me! How women

do deteriorate either with age or with marriage. I could ; I would think nothing of it but for my accident. Now tell me what has brought you here, Mehalaleel ? '

'I have come,' answered Mehalah looking down, 'because driven by necessity to apply to you, as our only relative.'

'Bless my soul ! Want my help ! How ? I wish I could as easily apply for yours. My dear girl, I am past help. I've hauled down my flag. All is up with me. I'm drawn up on the mud and put to auction. They are breaking me up. Tell your mother so. Tell her that time was—but let bygones be bygones. How is she looking ? Are the roses altogether faded ? '

'She is very feeble and suffering. She is greatly afflicted with ague.'

'She had it as a girl. One day as I was courting her and whispering pretty things in her ear, she was going to blush and smile, when all at once the fit of shivers came on her, and she could do nought but chatter her teeth and turn green and stream with cold sweat. So she is very feeble, is she ? '

'She is weak and ailing.'

'Women never do improve, like men, by

ripening,' said Mr. Pettican. 'Girls are angels up to one and twenty, some a little bit later, but after that they deteriorate and become old cats. They are roses up to marriage and after that are hips, with hard red skins outside and choke and roughness within. Men are quite the reverse. They are louts to twenty-five, as unformed in body as young colts, and in mind as young owls; after that they begin to ripen, and the older they get the better they grow. A man is like a medlar, only worth eating when rotten. A young man is raw and hard and indigestible, but a man of forty is full of juice and sweetness. Now don't tell your mother what I have said about old women.'

'I will not.'

'Sit ye down, sit ye down, and be jolly Don't stand. It does not fare to be comfortable.'

'Sir, I must mention the object of this visit.'

'All in good time. But first let us be jolly. Give me some fun, I haven't had any since—since' he pointed sadly to his flagless staff and shook his head. 'It is all up with me, save when a stray gleam of liveliness and mirth shoots athwart my gloomy sky. But that is rarely the case now.'

'Thank you, sir,' said Mehalah, taking a chair. 'Now to the point.'

'First be jolly. I have enough of mouths drawn down at the corners—but never mind now. Begone dull care, thou canker. Come! I should like your mother to know all about me. You will tell her how young I am looking. You will say that I would be sure to come tripping over to see her but for my accident.'

'I will tell her how I have seen you.'

'You needn't dwell on the crutches; but she knows, she has heard of that affliction of mine, it was the talk of the county, thousands of tender hearts beat in sympathy with me. My accident is one of long standing. I won't say when it happened. I have not a good head for dates, but any how it was not quite last year, or the year before that. It has told on me. I look older than I really am, and yet I am hearty and well. I have such an appetite. Just pull me up, dear, in the chair, and I will tell you what I eat. I had a rasher of bacon and a chop for breakfast, and a pewter of homebrewed beer; that don't look like a failing digestion, does it. And I shall eat,—Lord bless you! You would laugh to see me at my dinner, I eat like a ploughboy. That is not like the decay of old age attacking the witals, is it, my pretty? Now listen to me, and I will tell you all

about it. Do you chance to notice here and there a little grey in my hair? Just as though a few grains of salt had dropped among black pepper? They come of care, dearest, not of years. I never had a grizzled hair on my head till—till I struck my colours. Now I'll tell you all about it, and you tell your mother. She will pity me. One day in my yard I stumbled over a round of timber and fell on my back on it, and hurt my spine, and I've been a cripple ever since. It is a sad pity—such a fine, strapping, manly fellow as I, in the prime of age, to be laid by like an old condemned wessel! Well! here I have had to lie in my window, looking out, and not seeing much to interest me. But the girls of Wyvenhoe, bless their kind hearts,—they are angels up to one and twenty—used to come to the window, and wish me a good day, and ask after my health, and have pleasant little gossips, and be altogether jolly. Next, whenever they could, some one or two would bring her knitting or needlework, and come in, and sit here and spend an hour or so, talking, laughing and making fun. That was pleasant, wasn't it? It is wonderful what a lot those dear girls had to say for themselves; they became quite confidential with me, and told me all their

love affairs, and how matters stood, and who their sweethearts were. It was worth while being ill and laid on one's back to enjoy such society. Whenever I was dull and wanted some chat, I sent my man to hoist the flag, and the next girl that went by, "Ah!" said she, "there's that poor fellow would like my society," and in she came and sat talking with me as long as she was able. Then sometimes I had a dish of tea brought in, or some cakes, or fruit. It was a pleasant time. I wish it were to come over all again. Tell your mother all this. I was quite the pet of all the kind-hearted young folks in Wyvenhoe. Now that is over. I'll tell you about it.' He sighed and passed a shaking hand over his bright, twinkling eyes. 'You must explain it all to your mother,—Liddy that was. You see, I don't forget her name. Now tell me yours again; it is gone from me.'

'Mehalah.'

'I'll write it down in my note-book and then I shall remember it. My memory is overstocked, and it takes me a deal of time to find in it what I want. But your mother's name don't get buried, but lies at hand on the top. You'll tell her so. Now about my troubles. There was one damsel,

who was called Admonition; and she was very particularly pleasant and attentive to me, and many a little teasing and joking I had with her about her name. She was the girl fullest of fun, she regularly brimmed over with it, and it ran down her sides. She was a milliner, and had to work for her living. She had no relations and no money of her own. It is curious what a lot of cousins she has now, mostly in the seafaring line, and all young. Then she was always ready for a chat. She would bring her needlework and sit with me by the hour. I thought it vastly pleasant, and how much more pleasant it would be if she were always by my side to keep me laughing and chirpy. I must tell you that I go down some degrees when alone,—not that my spirits fail me with age,—it is constitutional. I was so as a boy. —Bless me! it seems to me only the other day when I was a romping lout of a lad—I'm crisp and crackly like seaweed in an East wind when I am in female society, that is, female society up to one and twenty—but I'm like the same seaweed in a Sou'wester when I'm alone. One day the flag was flying, but no visitor came except Admonition. It was the day of the Regatta. She said, and the tears came into her eyes, that

she was a lone girl, with no one to accompany her, so she had come to sit with me. She tried to cheer up and laugh, but she felt her loneliness so that my heart was touched, and I proposed and we were married.' There ensued a long pause. Mr. Pettican looked out of the window. 'I had a queer sort of premonitory feeling when I said, "I take thee Admonition to my wedded wife," but it was too late then to retract. Now the flag that has braved a thousand breezes is down. It has not flown since that day.'

'Where is Mrs. Pettican now?' asked Mehalah.

'At the Regatta,' answered the cripple. 'You'll tell your mother how I am situated. She will drop a tear for poor Charlie. I will tell you what, Me——' he looked at his note-book, 'Mehalah; men fancy all girls sultana raisins, but when they bite them they get very hard pips between their teeth. There's a Methodist preacher here has been haranguing on conversion, and persuading Admonition that she is a new creature. I know she is. She was converted on the day of the marriage ceremony; but the conversion was not something to boast of. Matrimony with women is what jibbing is with ships, they go

through a movement of staggering and then away they start off on a tack clean contrary to the course they were sailing before. Marriage, Mehalah, is like Devonshire cream; it is very rich and tasty, but it develops a deal of bile. Look here, my pretty!' In a moment he was off his chair, stumping in his crutches round the room, dragging his paralysed limbs after him. He returned to his chair. 'Put up my legs, dear,' he begged; then said, 'That is the state of my case; my better half is Admonition, the poor paralysed, helpless, dead half is me.'

He did not speak for some moments but brushed his eyes with his feeble hand. At last he said, 'I've unburdened my soul. Tell your mother. Now go ahead, and let me know what you want.'

Mehalah told Mr. Pettican the circumstances. She said that her mother wanted a loan of fifteen or twenty pounds. If she could not procure the sum, she would have her cow taken from her, then they would be unable to pay the rent next Lady Day, and be without milk for the winter. They would be turned out of the little farm on which her mother had lived so long, in quiet and contentment, and this would go far to break her

mother's heart. She told him candidly that the loan could only be repaid in instalments.

The old man listened patiently, only passing his hand in an agitated manner across his face several times.

'I wish I could help you,' he said, when she had done; 'I have money. I have laid by some. There is plenty in the box and more at the bank, but I can't get at it.'

'Sir!'

'Before I struck my colours, Mehalah, I did what I liked with my money; on market days my man went into Colchester, and I always gave him a little sum to lay out in presents for my kind visitors. Bless you! a very trifle pleased them. It is different now. I don't spend a penny myself. The money is spent for me. I don't keep the key of my cashbox. Admonition has it.'

'Then,' said Mehalah, rising from her seat, 'all is over with us. My mother, your cousin, will in her old age be cast destitute into the world. But, if you really wish to help her, be a man, use your authority, and do what you choose with your own.'

'Bless me!' exclaimed Mr. Pettican touching his brow with his trembling hand, 'I will be a man.

Am I not a man! If I don't exert my authority, people will say I am in my dotage. I—I—in my flower and cream of my age—in the dotage! Go, Me——' he looked in his note-book, 'Mehalah, fetch me my cashbox, it is in the bedroom cupboard upstairs, on the right, over this. Bring the box down. Stay though! Before you come down just feel in my wife's old dress pocket. She may have forgotten to take her keys with her to the Regatta. It is just possible.'

'I cannot do that.'

'Well, no, perhaps you had better not. Do you happen to have a bunch of keys with you.'

'No, sir.'

'Well, never mind. Bring me the case. I will be a man. I will show the world I am not in my dotage. I will be of the masculine gender, dative case, if it pleases me, and Admonition may lump it if she don't like it.'

Mehalah obeyed. She found the box, which was of iron, brought it downstairs, and placed it on the table by Mr. Pettican. 'I've been turning the matter over in my mind,' said he, 'and I see a very happy way out of it without a row. Give me the poker. You will find a cold chisel in that drawer.'

'I will tell you my idea. Whilst I am left here all alone, burglars have broken into the house, knowing my helpless condition, and have ransacked the place, found my cashbox and broken it open.' He chuckled and rubbed his hands. 'I shall be able accurately to describe the ruffians. One has a black moustache, and the other a red beard, and they look like foreigners and speak a Dutch jargon.'

He put the chisel to the lid, and struck at it with the poker, starting the hinges by the blow.

At that moment the door was flung wide, and in swam a dashing young woman in very gay colours, on the arm of a yachtsman.

'Charles!' she cried, 'what are you after?' then turning abruptly on Mehalah, 'And pray what are you doing here, in my house?' Mr. Pettican's head which had been craned forward in eagerness over the box, retreated amidst the collar and cravat, and almost disappeared.

'Who are you?' she asked of Mehalah, with an insulting air. 'Out of this house with you at once!'

'My dear Monie!' pleaded Mr. Pettican, lifting his shaking hands into an attitude of prayer.

'No "My dears" and "Monies?" to me,' said the wife. 'I want to know what you are after with my cashbox? Ho, ho! trying to prize it open and squander my little sums laid aside for household expenses on—Heaven knows whom.'

'Mr. Pettican is my mother's cousin,' said Mehalah.

'Cousin, indeed! never heard Mr. Pettican speak of you. Cousins are sure to turn up when money is wanted.'

'Mr. Pettican,' said Mehalah, refusing to notice the insolent woman, 'be a man and let me have the money you promised.'

'I should like to be a man, oh! I wish I were a man! But I can't, I can't indeed, dear. I haven't been myself since I hauled down my flag.'

'Charles, hold out your hand, and invite my cousin Timothy to dinner. He has kindly consented to stay a fortnight with us.'

'Timothy!' echoed Mr. Pettican, 'I did not know you had such a cousin.'

'Do you think you know anything of my relations!' exclaimed Admonition; 'I should hope not, they are a little above your sphere. There are lots more cousins!'

The poor little man sat shrinking behind his blinkers, peering piteously now at Mehalah, and then at his wife.

'Be a man,' said Mehalah, grasping him by both hands. 'Save us from ruin.'

'Can't do it, Pretty, can't. I have struck my colours.'

CHAPTER XI.

A DUTCH AUCTION.

MEHALAH returned sadly to the Ray. The hope that had centred in help from Wyvenhoe had been extinguished.

Her mother was greatly disappointed at the ill-success of the application, but flattered at her cousin's recollection of her.

'If it had not been for that woman's coming in when she did, we should have had the money,' said Mrs. Sharland. 'What a pity she did not remain away a little longer. Charles is very well disposed, and would help us if he could pluck up courage to defy his wife. Suppose you try again, Mehalah, some other day, and choose your time well.'

'I will not go there again, mother.'

'If we do get turned out of this place we

might settle at Wyvenhoe, and then choose our opportunity.'

'Mother, the man is completely under his wife's thumb. There is no help to be found there.'

'Then, Mehalah, the only chance that remains, is to get the money from the Mersea parson.'

'He cannot help us.'

'There is no harm trying.'

The day on which Mrs. De Witt had threatened to come had passed, without her appearing. True it had blown great guns, and there had been storms of rain. Mrs. Sharland hoped that the danger was over. The primitive inhabitants of the marshes had dwelt on piles, she built on straws. Some people do not realise a danger till it is on them and they cannot avert it. Mrs. Sharland was one of these. She liked her grievance, and loved to moan over it; if she had not a real one she invented one, just as children celebrate funerals over dolls. She had been so accustomed to lament over toy troubles that when a real trouble threatened she was unable to measure its gravity.

She was a limp and characterless woman.

Mehalah had inherited the rich red blood of her grandparents, and Mrs. Sharland had assimilated only the water, and this flowed feebly through her pale veins. Her nature was parasitic. She could not live on her own root, but must adhere to a character stronger than herself. She had hung on and smothered her husband, and now she dragged at her daughter. Mehalah must stand upright or Mrs. Sharland would crush her to the ground. There are women like articles of furniture that will 'wobble' unless a penny or a wedge of wood be put under their feet. Mrs. Sharland was always crying out for some trifle to steady her.

Mehalah did not share her mother's anticipations that the danger had passed with the day, that Mrs. De Witt's purpose had given way to kinder thoughts; she was quite sure that she would prove relentless and push matters to extremities. It was this certainty which drove her to act once more on her mother's suggestion, and go to the Mersea Rectory, to endeavour to borrow the sum of money needed to relieve them from immediate danger.

She found the parson in his garden without his coat which hung on the hedge, making a potatoe pie for the winter.

He was on all fours packing the tubers in straw. His boots and gaiters were clogged with clay.

'Hallo!' he exclaimed as Mehalah came up. 'You the girl they call Glory? Look here. I want you to see my kidneys. Did you ever see the like, come clean out of the ground without canker. Would you like a peck? I'll give them you. Boil beautiful.'

'I want to speak with you, sir.'

'Speak then by all means, and don't mind me. I must attend to my kidneys. A fine day like this is not to be wasted at this time of the year. Go on. There is an ashtop for you. I don't care for the potatoe as a potatoe. It don't boil all to flour as I like. You can have a few if you like. Now go on.'

Down went his head again, and was buried in a nest of straw. Mehalah waited. She did not care to address his back and legs, the only part of his person visible.

'You can't be too careful with potatoes,' said the parson, presently emerging, very red in the face, and with a pat of clay on his nose. 'You must make them comfortable for the winter. Do to others as you would they should do to you.

Keep them well from frost, and they will boil beautiful all the winter through. Go on with your story. I am listening,' and in went the head again.

Mehalah lost heart. She could not begin thus.

'Pah! how I sweat,' exclaimed the parson, again emerging. 'The sun beats down on my back, and the black waistcoat draws the heat. And we are in November. This won't last. Have you your potatoes in, Glory?'

'We have only a few on the Ray.'

'You ought to have more. Potatoes like a light soil well drained. You have gravel, and with some good cow-dung or sheep-manure, which is better still, with your fall, they ought to do primely. I'll give you seed. It is all nonsense, as they do here, planting small whole potatoes. Take a good strong tuber, and cut it up with an eye in each piece; then you get a better plant than if you keep the little half-grown potatoes for seed. However, I'm wasting time. I'll be back in a moment. I must fetch another basket load. Go on with your story all the same: I can hear you. I shall only be in the shed behind the Rectory.'

Parson Tyll was a curate of one parish

across the Strood and of the two on the island. The rector was non-resident, on the plea of the insalubrity of the spot. He had held the rectory of one parish and the vicarage of the other thirty years, and during that period had visited his cures twice, once to read himself in, and on the other occasion to exact some tithes denied him.

'All right,' said Mr. Tyll, returning from the back premises staggering under a crate full of roots. 'Go on, I am listening. Pick up those kidneys which have rolled out. Curse it, I hate their falling and getting bruised; they won't keep. There now, you never saw finer potatoes in your life than these. My soil here is the same as yours on the Ray. Don't plant too close, and not in ridges. I'll tell you what I do. I put mine in five feet apart and make heaps round each. I don't hold by ridges. Hillocks is my doctrine. Go on, I am listening. Here, lend me a hand, and chuck me in the potatoes as I want them. You can talk all the same.'

Parson Tyll crept into his heap and seated himself on his haunches. 'Chuck away, but not too roughly. They mustn't be bruised. Now go on, I can stack the tubers and listen all the same.'

'Sir,' said Mehalah, out of heart at her reception, 'we are in great trouble and difficulty.'

'I have no doubt of it; none in the world. You don't grow enough potatoes. Now look at my kidneys. They are the most prolific potatoes I know. I introduced them, and they go by my name. You may ask for them anywhere as Tyll's kidneys. Go on, I am listening.'

'We owe Mrs. De Witt a matter of five and twenty pounds,' began Mehalah, red with shame; 'and how to pay her we do not know.'

'Nor I,' said the parson. 'You have tried to go on without potatoes, and you can't do it. Others have tried and failed. You should keep geese on the saltings, and fowls. Fowls ought to thrive on a sandy soil, but then you have no corn land, that makes a difference. Potatoes, however, especially my kidneys, ought to be a treasure to you. Take my advice, be good, grow potatoes. Go on, I am listening. Chuck me some more. How is the stock in the basket? Does it want replenishing? Look here, my lass, go to the coach-house and bring me some more. There is a heap in the corner; on the left; those on the right are ashtops. They go in a separate

pie. You can talk as you go, I shall be here and harkening.'

Mehalah went sullenly to the place where the precious roots were stored, and brought him a basketful.

'By the way,' said the parson, peeping out of his mole-hill at her, 'it strikes me you ought not to be here now. Is there not a sale on your farm to-day?'

'A sale, sir?'

'A sale, to be sure. Mrs. De Witt has carried off my clerk to act as auctioneer, or he would be helping me now with my potatoes. She has been round to several of the farmers to invite them to attend and bid, and they have gone to see if they can pick up some ewes or a cow cheap.'

Mehalah staggered. Was this possible?

'Go on with your story, I'm listening,' continued the parson, diving back into his burrow, so that only the less honourable extremity of his vertebral column was visible. 'Talk of potatoes. There's not one to come up to Tyll's kidneys. Go on, I am all attention! Chuck me some more potatoes.'

But Mehalah was gone, and was making the best of her way back.

Parson Tyll was right. This fine November day was that which it had struck Mrs. De Witt, was most suitable for the sale, that would produce the money.

Mehalah had not long left the Strood before a strange procession began to cross the Marshes.

Mrs. De Witt sat aloft in a tax-cart borrowed of Isaac Mead, the publican, by the side of his boy who drove. Behind, very uncomfortably, much in the attitude of a pair of scissors, sat the clerk, folded nearly double in the bottom of the cart; his head reclined on Mrs. De Witt's back and the seat of the vehicle, his legs hung over the board at the back, and swung about like those of a calf being carried to market or to the butcher's. Mrs. De Witt wore her red coat, and a clean washed or stiffly starched cap. She led the way. The road over the Marshes was bad, full of holes, and greasy. A recent tide had corrupted the clay into strong brown glue.

The farmers and others who followed to attend the sale had put up their gigs and carts at the cottage of the Strood keeper, and pursued their way on foot. But Mrs. De Witt was above such feebleness of nerve. She had engaged the trap for the day, and would take her money's

worth out of it. The boy had protested at the Strood that the cart of his master could not go over the marshes, that Isaac Mead had not supposed it possible that it would be taken over so horrible and perilous a road. Mrs. De Witt thereupon brought her large blue gingham umbrella down on the lad's back, and vowed she would open him like an oyster with her pocket-knife unless he obeyed her. She looked quite capable of fulfilling her threat, and he submitted.

The cart jerked from side to side. The clerk's head struck Mrs. De Witt several sharp blows in the small of her back. She turned sharply round, pegged at him with the umbrella, and bade him mind his manners.

'Let me get out. I can't bear this, ma'am,' pleaded the man.

'It becomes you to ride to the door as the officer of justice,' answered she. 'If I can ride, so can you. Lie quiet,' and she banged at him with the umbrella again.

At that moment there came a jolt of a more violent description than before, and Mrs. De Witt was suddenly precipitated over the splash-board, and, after a battle in the air, on the back of the

prostrate horse, with her feet, hands and umbrella, she went into a mud hole. The horse was down, but the knees of the clerk were up far above his head. He struggled to rise, but was unable, and could only bellow for assistance.

Mrs. De Witt picked herself up and assisted the boy in bringing the horse to his feet again. Then she coolly pinned up her gown to her knees, and strode forward. The costume was not so shocking to her native modesty as might have been supposed, nor did it scandalise the farmers, for it was that adopted by the collectors of winkles on the flats. The appearance presented by Mrs. De Witt was, however, grotesque. In the mud her legs had sunk to the knees, and they looked as though she wore a pair of highly polished Hessian boots. The skirt and the red coat gave her a curious nondescript military cut, as half Highlander. Though she walked, she would not allow the clerk to dismount. She whacked at the pendant legs when they rose and protested, and bade the fellow lie still; he was all right, and it was only proper that he, the functionary on the occasion, should arrive in state, instead of on his own shanks.

'If you get up on the seat you'll be bobbed

off like a pea on a drum. Lie in the bottom of the cart and be peaceful, as is your profession,' said Mrs. De Witt, with a dig of the umbrella over the side.

They formed a curious assemblage. There were the four brothers Marriage of Peldon, not one of whom had taken a wife. Once, indeed, the youngest, Herbert, had formed matrimonial schemes; but on his ventilating the subject, had been fallen on by his three brothers and three unmarried sisters who kept house for them, as though he had hinted the introduction of a cask of gunpowder into the cellars. He had been scolded and lectured, and taunted, as the apostate, the profligate, the prodigal, who was bent on the ruin of the family, the dissipation of the accumulated capital of years of labour, the introducer of discord into a united household. And yet the household was only united in theory, in fact the brothers were always fighting and swearing at one another about the order of the work to be executed on the farm, and the sisters quarrelled over the household routine.

There was Joshua Pudney, of Smith's Hall, who loved his bottle and neglected his farm, who grew more thistles than wheat, and kept more

hunters than cows, a jolly fat red-faced man with white hair, always in top boots. Along with him was Nathaniel Pooley, who combined preaching with farming, was noted for sharp practice in money matters, and for not always coming out of pecuniary transactions with clean hands. Pudney cursed and Pooley blessed, yet the labourers were wont to say that Pudney's curses broke no bones, but Pooley's blessings did them out of many a shilling. Pudney let wheat litter in his stubble, and bid the gleaners go in and be damned, when he threw the gate open to them. Pooley raked the harvest field over thrice and then opened the gleaning with an invocation to Providence to bless the widow, the fatherless, and the poor who gathered in his fields.

Farmer Wise was a gaunt, close-shaven man, always very neatly dressed, a great snuff-taker. He was a politician, and affected to be a Whig, whilst all the rest of his class were Tories. He was argumentative, combative, and cantankerous, a close, careful man, and reported a miser.

A dealer, riding a black pony, a wonderful little creature that scampered along at a flying trot, came up and slackened rein. He was a

stout man in a very battered hat, with shabby coat; a merry man, and a good judge of cattle.

The proceedings of the day were, perhaps, hardly in accordance with strict English law, but then English law was precisely like Gospel precepts, made for other folk. On the Essex marshes people did not trouble themselves much about the legality of their proceedings; they took the law in their own hands. If the law suited them they used it, if not they did without it. But, legally or not legally, they got what they wanted. It was altogether inconvenient and expensive for the recovery of a small debt to apply to a solicitor and a magistrate, and the usual custom was, therefore, to do the thing cheaply and easily through the clerk of the parish constituted auctioneer for the occasion, and the goods of the defaulter were sold by him to an extemporised assembly of purchasers on any day that suited the general convenience. The clerk so far submitted to legal restrictions that he did not run goods *up*, but down; he began with an absurdly high figure, instead of one preposterously low.

When the cart and its contents and followers arrived at the Ray, the horse was taken out, and the vehicle was run against a rick of hay, into

which the shafts were deeply thrust, so as to keep the cart upright, that it might serve as a rostrum for the auctioneer.

'We'll go and take stock first,' said the clerk; 'we've to raise twenty-five pounds for the debt and twenty shillings my costs. What is there to sell?'

'Wait a bit, gaffer,' said the cattle jobber; 'you're a trifle too quick. The old lady must demand the money first.'

'I'm agoing to do so, Mr. Mellonie,' said Mrs. De Witt; 'you teach your grandmother to shell shrimps.' Then, looking round on about twenty persons who had assembled, she said, 'Follow me. Stay! here comes more. Oh! it is Elijah Rebow and his men come to see fair play. Come by water have you, Elijah. We are not going to sell anything of yours, you needn't fear.'

She shouldered her umbrella like an oar, and strode to the house door. Mrs. Sharland was there, white and trembling.

'Have you got my money?' asked Mrs. De Witt.

'Oh, mistress,' exclaimed the unfortunate widow, 'do have pity and patience. Mehalah has just gone to get it.'

'Gone to get it?' echoed Mrs. De Witt. 'Why, where in the name of wonder does she expect to get it?'

'She had gone to Parson Tyll to borrow it.'

'Then she won't get it,' said the drover. 'There's no money to be wrung out of empty breeches pockets.'

'Let me into the house,' said Mrs. De Witt. 'Let us all see what you have got. There's a clock. Drag it out, and stick it up under the tree near the cart. That is worth a few pounds. And take that chair.'

'It is my chair. I sit in it, and I have the ague so bad.'

'Take the chair,' persisted Mrs. De Witt, and Rebow's men carried it forth. 'There's some good plates there. Is there a complete set?'

'There are only six.'

'That is better than none. Out with them. What have you got in the corner cupboard?'

'Nothing but trifles.'

'We'll sell the cupboard and the dresser. You can't move the dresser, Elijah. We'll carry it in our heads. Look at it,' she said to the clerk; 'see you don't forget to put that up. Now

shall we go into the bedrooms, or go next to the cowhouse?'

'Leave the bedroom,' said Mellonie, 'you can't sell the bed from under the old woman.'

'I can though, if I don't raise enough,' said Mrs. De Witt. 'I've slept on a plank many a time.'

'Oh dear! Oh dear!' moaned the widow Sharland; 'I wish Mehalah had returned; perhaps she has the money.'

'No chance of that, mistress,' said Rebow. 'You are sold up and done for past escape now. What will you do next, you and that girl Glory, I'd like to know?'

'I think she will get the money,' persisted the widow.

Elijah turned from her with a sneer.

'Outside with you,' shouted Mrs. De Witt. 'The sale is going to begin.'

The men—there were no women present except Mrs. De Witt—quickly evacuated the house and pushed into the stable and cowhouse.

There was no horse, and only one cow. The sheep were on the saltings. There was no cart, and very few tools of any sort. The little farm was solely a sheep farm, there was not an acre of tillage land attached to it.

The clerk climbed up into the cart.

'Stop, stop, for Heaven's sake!' gasped Mehalah dashing up. 'What is this! Why have we not been warned?'

'Oh yes! forewarned indeed, and get rid of the things,' growled Mrs. De Witt. 'But I did tell you what I should do, and precious good-natured I was to do it.'

Mehalah darted past her into the house.

'Tell me, tell me!' cried the excited mother, 'have you the money?'

'No. The parson could not let me have it.'

'Hark! they have begun the sale. What is it they are crying now?'

'The clock, mother. Oh, this is dreadful.'

'They will sell the cow too,' said the widow.

'Certain to do so.'

'There! I hear the dresser's put up. Who has bought the clock?'

'Oh never mind, that matters nothing. We are ruined.'

'Oh dear, dear!' moaned Mrs. Sharland, 'that it should come to this! But I suppose I must, I must indeed. Run Mehalah, run quick and unrip the belt of my green gown. Quick, fetch it me.'

The girl hastily obeyed. The old woman got her knife, and with trembling hand cut away the lining in several parts of the body. Shining sovereigns came out.

'There are twenty here,' she said with a sigh, 'and we have seven over of what George let us have. Give the wretches the money.'

'Mother, mother!' exclaimed Mehalah. 'How could you borrow! How could you send me——!'

'Never mind, I did not want to use my little store till every chance had failed. Run out and pay the money.'

Mehalah darted from the door.

The clerk was selling the cow.

'Going for twenty-five pounds. What? no one bid, going for twenty-five pounds, and dirt cheap at the money, all silent! Well I never, and such a cow! Going for twenty-three——'

'Stop!' shouted Mehalah. 'Here is Mrs. De Witt's money, twenty-five pounds.'

'Damnation!' roared Elijah, 'where did you get it?'

'Our savings,' answered Mehalah, and turned her back on him.

CHAPTER XII.

A GILDED BALCONY.

MEHALAH was hurt and angry at her mother's conduct. She thought that she had not been fairly treated. When the loss sustained presumably by Abraham Dowsing's carelessness had been discovered, Mrs. Sharland had not hinted the existence of a private store, and had allowed De Witt to lend her the money she wanted for meeting the rent. Glory regarded this conduct as hardly honest. It jarred, at all events, with her sense of what was honourable. On the plea of absolute inability to pay the rent, they had obtained five and twenty pounds from the young fisherman. Then again, when Mrs. De Witt reclaimed the debt, Mehalah had been subjected to the humiliation of appealing to Mr. Pettican and being repulsed by Admonition. She had been further driven to sue a loan of the parson; she had not, indeed, asked him for the money, but that was

only because he avoided, intentionally or not she could not say, giving her the chance. She had gone with the intention of begging, and his manner, and the accidental discovery that the sale was already taking place, had alone prevented her from undergoing the shame of asking and being refused.

She did not like to charge her mother with having behaved dishonourably, for she felt instinctively that her mother's views and hers were not coincident. Her brow was clouded, and an unpleasant gleam flickered in her eyes. She resisted the treatment she had been subjected to as unnecessary. It was only justifiable in an extreme emergency, and no such emergency had existed. Her mother would rather sacrifice her daughter's self-respect than break in on the little hoard.

'Charles said he had money in the bank, did he?' asked Mrs. Sharland.

'Yes.'

'To think of that! My cousin has an account in the bank, and can write his cheques, and one can cash cheques signed Charles Pettican! That is something to be proud of, Mehalah.'

'Indeed, mother?'

'And you say he has a beautiful house, with a

verandah. A real gilt balcony. Think of that! And Charles is my cousin, the cousin of your own mother. There's something to think of, there. I couldn't sleep last night with dreaming of that house with its green shutters and a real balcony. I do believe that I shall die happy, if some day I may but see that there gilded—you said it was gilded—balcony. Charles Pettican with a balcony! What is the world coming to next! A real gilded balcony, and two figureheads looking over—there's an idea. Did you tell me there was a sofa in his sitting-room; and I think you said the dressing-table had a pink petticoat with gauze over it. Just think of that. I might have been Mrs. Charles Pettican, if all had gone well, and things had been as they should have, and then I should have had a petticoat to my dressing-table and a balcony afore my window. I am glad you went, it was like the Queen of Sheba visiting Solomon and seeing all his glory, and now you've come back into your own land, and filled me with your tidings.'

Mehalah let her mother meander on, without paying any attention to what she said. Mrs. Sharland had risen some stages in her self-importance since she had heard how prosperous in a

pecuniary sense her relation was. It shed a sort of glory on her when she thought that, had fate ruled it so, she might have shared with him this splendour, instead of being poor and lonely on the desolate Ray. Mrs. Sharland would have loved a gossip, but never got a chance of talking to anyone with a similar partiality. Had she married Mr. Charles Pettican she would have been in the vortex of a Maelstrom of tittle-tattle. It was something to puff her up to think that if matters had taken another turn this would have been her position in Wyvenhoe.

'I don't think Mrs. De Witt had any notion how rich and distinguished my relatives are, when she came here asking for her five and twenty pounds. I'll take my oath on it, she has no cousin with a balcony and a sofa. I don't suppose we shall be troubled much now, when it is known that my cousin draws cheques, and that the name of Charles Pettican is honoured at the bank.'

'You forget we got, and shall get, no help from him.'

'I do not forget it, Mehalah. I remember perfectly, how affably he spoke of me—his Liddy Vince, his pretty cousin. I do not forget how

ready he was to lend the money. Twenty pounds! if you had asked fifty, he'd have given it you as readily. He was about to break open his cash-box, as he hadn't the key by him, and would have given me the money I wanted, had not a person who is no relation of mine interposed. That comes of designing women stepping in between near relatives. Charles Pettican is my cousin, and he is not ashamed to acknowledge it; why should he? I have always maintained myself respectable, and always shall.'

'Mother,' said Mehalah, interrupting this watery wash of vain twaddle, 'you should not have borrowed the money of George De Witt. That was the beginning of the mischief!'

'Beginning of what mischief?'

'The beginning of our trouble.'

'No, it was not; Abraham's carelessness was the beginning.'

'But mother, I repeat it, you did wrong in not producing your hidden store instead of borrowing.'

'I did not borrow. I never asked George De Witt for his money, he proposed to let us have it himself.'

'That is indeed true; but you should have at

once refused to take it, and said it was unnecessary for us to be indebted to him, as you had the sum sufficient laid by.'

'That is all very well, Mehalah, but when a generous offer is made me, why should I not accept it? Because there's still some milk of yesterday in the pan, do you decline to milk the cow to-day? I was glad of the opportunity of keeping my little savings untouched. Besides, I always thought George would make you his wife.'

'I thought so too,' said Mehalah in a low tone, and her face became sad and blank as before; she went off into a dream, but presently recovered herself and said, 'Then, when Mrs. De Witt asked for her money, why did you not produce it, and free us of her insults and annoyance?'

'I did not want to part with my money. And it has turned out well. If I had done as you say, we should not have revived old acquaintance, and obtained the valuable assistance of Charles Pettican.'

'He did not assist us.'

'He did as far as he was able. He would have given us the money, had not untoward circumstances intervened. He as good as let us have

the twenty pounds. That is something to be proud of—to be helped by a man whose name is honoured at the bank—at the Colchester Bank.'

'But, mother, you have given me inexpressible pain!'

'Pained you!' exclaimed Mrs. Sharland. 'How could I?'

Her eyes opened wide. Mehalah looked at her. They had such different souls, that the girl saw it was of no use attempting to explain to her mother what had wounded her; her sensations belonged to a sense of which her mother was deprived. It is idle to speak of scarlet to a man who is blind.

'I did it all for you,' said Mrs. Sharland reproachfully. 'I was thinking and caring only for you, Mehalah, from beginning to end, from first to last.'

'Thinking and caring for me!' echoed Glory in surprise.

'Of course I was. I put those gold pieces away, one a quarter from the day you were born, till I had no more savings that I could put aside. I put them away for you. I thought that when I was gone and buried, you should have this little sum to begin the world upon, and you would not

say that your mother died and left you nothing. Nothing in the world would have made me touch the hoard, for it was your money, Mehalah—nothing but the direst need, and you will do me the justice to say that this was the case to-day. It would have been the worst that could have happened for you to-day had the money not been paid, for you would have sunk in the scale.'

'Mother!' exclaimed Mehalah, intensely moved, 'you did all this for *me*; you thought and cared for *me*—for *me*!'

The idea of her mother having ever done anything for her, ever having thought of her, apart from herself, of having provided for her independently of herself, was too strange and too amazing for Mehalah to take it in at once. As long as she remembered anything she had worked for her mother, thought for her, and denied herself for her, without expecting any return, taking it as a matter of course that she should devote herself to her mother without the other making any acknowledgment.

And now the thought that she had been mistaken, that her mother had really cared for and provided for her, overwhelmed her. She had

not wept when she thought that George De Witt was lost to her, but now she dropt into her chair, buried her face in her arms, and burst into a storm of sobs and tears.

Mrs. Sharland looked at her with a puzzled face. She never had understood Mehalah, and she was content to be in the dark as to what was passing in her breast now. She settled back in her chair, and turned back to the thoughts of Charles Pettican's gilt balcony, and petticoated dressing-table.

By degrees Mehalah recovered her composure, then she went up to her mother and kissed her passionately on the brow.

'Mother dear,' she said in a broken voice, 'I never, never will desert you. Whatever happens, our lot shall be cast together.'

Then she reared herself, and in a moment was firm of foot, erect of carriage, rough and imperious as of old.

'I must look after the sheep on the saltings,' she said. 'Abraham's head is turned with the doings here to-day, and he has gone to the Rose to talk and drink it over. The moon is full, and we shall have a high tide.'

Next moment Mrs. Sharland was alone.

The widow heaved a sigh. 'There is no making heads or tails of that girl, I don't understand her a bit,' she muttered.

'I do though,' answered Elijah Rebow at the door. 'I want a word with you, mistress.'

'I thought you had gone, Elijah, after the sale.'

'No, I did not leave with the rest. I hung about in the marshes, waiting a chance when I might speak with you by yourself. I can't speak before Glory; she flies out.'

'Come in, master, and sit down. Mehalah is gone down to the saltings, and will not be back for an hour.'

'I must have a word with you. Where has Glory been? I saw her go off t'other day in gay Sunday dress towards Fingringhoe. What did she go after?'

Mrs. Sharland raised herself proudly. 'I have a cousin lives at Wyvenhoe, and we exchange civilities now and then. I can't go to him and he can't come to me, so Mehalah passes between us.'

'What does she go there for?'

'My cousin, Mr. Charles Pettican—I dare say you have heard the name, it is a name that

is honoured at the bank——' She paused and pursed up her lips.

'Go on, I have heard of him, an old shipbuilder.'

'He made his fortune in shipbuilding,' said Mrs. Sharland. 'He has laid by a good deal of money, and is a free and liberal man with it, among his near relatives.'

'Curse him,' growled Elijah, 'he let you have the money?'

'I sent Mehalah to my cousin Charles, to ask him to lend me a trifle, being for a moment inconvenienced,' said Mrs. Sharland with stateliness.

'She—Glory—went cringing for money to an old shipbuilder!' exclaimed Rebow with fury in his face.

'She did not like doing so,' answered the widow, 'but I entreated her to put her prejudices in her pocket, and do as I wished. You see, Master Rebow, this was not like asking strangers. Charles is my cousin, my nearest living relative, and some day, perhaps, there is no knowing——' she winked, and nodded, and ruffled up in her pride. 'We are his nearest of kin, and he is an old man, much older than I am. I am young compared to him, and he is half-paralysed.'

'He gave the money without any difficulty or demur?' asked Elijah, his face flaming.

'He was most willing, anxious, I may say, to help. You see, Master Rebow, he is well off, and has no other relatives. He is a man of fortune, and has a gilt balcony before his house, and a real sofa in his sitting-room. His name is engraved on brass on a plate on the door, it commands respect and receives honour at the Colchester Bank.'

'So you are fawning on him, are you?' growled Elijah.

'He has real oil-paintings on his walls. There's some in water-colours, and some in worsted work, but I make no count of them, but real oils, you know; there's something to think of in that. A man don't break out into oil unless he has money in the bank at command.'

Mrs. Sharland was delighted with the opportunity of airing her re-discovered cousin, and exalting his splendour before some one other than her daughter.

'A valance all round his bed — there's luxury!' said the widow, 'and that bed a whole tester. As for his dressing-table, it wears a better petticoat than I, pink calico that looks like silk,

and over it gauze, just like a lady at an assembly ball, a real quality lady. My cousin is not one to see his Liddy—he calls me his pretty cousin Liddy—my name before I was married was Vince, but instead of Sharland it might have been Pettican, if all had been as it ought. I say cousin Charles is not the man to see his relatives sold up stick and stock by such as Mrs. De Witt.'

'You think if you can't pay me my rent, he will help you again?'

'If I feel a little behind-hand, Master Rebow, I shall not scruple sending Mehalah to him again. Charles is a man of kind and generous heart, and it is touching how he clings to his own flesh and blood. He has taken a great affection for Mehalah. He calls her niece, and wants her to look on him as an uncle, but you know that is not the real relationship. He was my mother's only brother's son, so we was first cousins, and he can only be a cousin of some sort to Mehalah, can he?'

'Oh, curse your cousinships!' broke in Elijah angrily. 'To what an extent can you count on his help?'

'To any amount,' said the widow, too elated to care to limit her exaggeration.

'How is Mehalah? Is she more inclined to think of me?'

Mrs. Sharland shook her head.

'She don't love me?' said Elijah with a laugh.

'I fear not, Elijah.'

'She won't be disposed to take up her quarters at Red Hall?'

Mrs. Sharland sighed a negative.

'Nor to bear with me near her all day?'

'No, Elijah.'

'No, she won't,' said he with a jerky laugh, 'she won't till she is made to. She won't come to Red Hall till she can't help it. She won't live with me till I force her to it. Damn that cousin! He stands in my path. I will go see him. There comes Mehalah, back from the saltings. I must be off.'

'My cousin is a man of importance,' observed Mrs. Sharland, bridling up at Elijah's slighting remark. 'He is not accustomed to be cursed. Men with names that the bank honours, and who have gilded balconies over their doors, don't like it, they don't deserve it.'

CHAPTER XIII.

THE FLAG FLIES.

A MONTH after the interrupted auction, Elijah Rebow appeared one day before Mr. Pettican's door at Wyvenhoe. The gull was screaming and flying at his feet. His stick beat a loud summons on the door, but the noise within was too considerable for the notices of a visitor to be heard and responded too.

Elijah remained grimly patient outside, with a sardonic smile on his face, and amused himself with tormenting the gull.

Presently the door flew open, and a dashing young woman flung out, with cherry-coloured ribands in her bonnet, and cherry colour in her cheeks.

'All right, Monie?' asked a voice from the balcony, and then Elijah was aware of a young man in a blue guernsey and a straw hat lounging

over the balustrade, between the figure-heads, smoking a pipe.

'He has learned his place at last,' answered Admonition; 'I never saw him so audacious before. Come along, Timothy.' The young man disappeared, and presently emerged at the door. At the same time a little withered face was visible at the window, with a dab of putty, as it seemed, in the middle of it, but which was probably a nose flattened against the glass. Two little fists were also apparent shaken violently, and a shrill voice screamed imprecations and vowed vengeance behind the panes, utterly disregarded by Admonition and Timothy, who stared at Elijah, and then struck down the gravelled path without troubling themselves to ask his business.

The door was left open, and Elijah entered, but stood on the threshold, and looked after the pair as they turned out of the garden-gate, and took the Colchester road, laughing and talking, and Admonition tossing her saucy head, in the direction of the face at the window, and then taking the sailor's arm.

A wonderful transformation had taken place in Mrs. Pettican's exterior as well as in her manner since her marriage.

She had been a soft demure little body with melting blue eyes and rich brown hair very smoothly laid on either side of her brow—a modest brow with guilelessness written on it—and the simplest little curls beside her round cheeks. She wore only black, in memory of a never-to-be-forgotten mother, and a neat white cap and apron. If she allowed herself a little colour, it was only a flower in her bosom. Poor Charles Pettican! How often he had supplied that flower!

'I can't pick one myself, Admonition,' he had said; 'you go into my garden and pluck a rose.'

'But *you* must give it me,' she had invariably said on such occasions, with a shy eye just lifted, and then dropped again.

And of course Mr. Pettican had presented the flower with a compliment, and an allusion to her cheek, which had always deepened the modest flush in it.

Now Admonition affected bright colours—cherry was her favourite. She who had formerly dressed below her position, now dressed above it, she was this day flashing through Wyvenhoe in a straw broad-brimmed hat with crimson bows, lined with crimson, and in a white dress adorned

with carnation knots, and a red handkerchief over the shoulders worn bare in the house. There was no doubt about it, that Admonition looked very well thus attired, better even than in her black.

Her hair was now frizzled over her brow, and she wore a mass of curls about her neck, confined in the house by a carnation riband. The soft eyes were now marvellously hard when directed upon the husband, and only retained their velvet for Timothy. The cheek now blushed at nothing, but flamed at the least opposition.

'I married one woman and got another,' said Charles Pettican to himself many times a day. 'I can't make it out at all. Marriage to a woman is, I suppose, much like a hot bath to a baby; it brings out all the bad humours in the blood. Young girls are as alike as flour and plaister of Paris, and it is not till you begin to be the making of them that you find the difference. Some make into bread, but others make into stone.'

When Elijah Rebow entered the little parlour, he found Mr. Pettican nearly choked with passion. He was ripping at his cravat to get it off, and obtain air. His face was nearly purple. He took no notice of his visitor for a few moments, but

continued shaking his fist at the window, and then dragging at his neckcloth.

Being unable to turn himself about, the unfortunate man nearly strangled himself in his inability to unwind his cravat. This increased his anger, and he screamed and choked convulsively.

'You will smother yourself soon,' observed Elijah dryly, and going up to Mr. Pettican, he loosened the neckcloth.

The cripple lay back and panted. Presently he was sufficiently recovered to project his head towards Rebow, and ask him what he wanted, and who he was.

Elijah told him his name. Charles Pettican did not pay attention to him; his mind was engrossed by other matters.

'Come here,' said he, 'here, beside me. Do you see them?'

'See what?' asked Elijah in return, gruffly, as Pettican caught his arm, and drew him down, and pointed out of the window.

'There they are. Isn't it wexing to the last degree of madness?'

'Do you mean your daughter and her sweetheart?'

'Daughter!' echoed the cripple. 'Daughter! I wish she was. No, she's my wife. I don't mean her'

'What do you mean then?'

'Why, my crutches. Don't you see them?'

'No, I do not,' answered Rebow looking round the room.

'They are not here,' said Pettican. 'Admonition flew out upon me, because I wouldn't draw more money from the bank, and she took away my crutches, to confine me till I came into her whimsies. There they are. They are flying at the mast-head. She got that cousin of hers to hoist them. She knows I can't reach them, that here I must lie till somebody fetches them down for me. You should have heard how they laughed, those cousins as they call themselves, as my crutches went aloft. Oh! it was fun to them, and they could giggle and cut jokes about me sitting here, flattening my nose at the pane, and seeing my crutches hoisted. They might as well have robbed me of my legs—better, for they are of no use, and my crutches are. Fetch me them down.'

Elijah consented, chuckling to himself at the distress of the unfortunate shipbuilder. He

speedily ran the crutches down, and returned them to Pettican.

'Turning me into fun before the whole town!' growled Pettican, 'exposing my infirmity to all the world! It was my wife did it. Admonition urged on her precious cousin Timothy to it. He did fare to be ashamed, but she laughed him into it, just as Eve jeered Adam into eating the apple. She has turned off my servant too, and here am I left alone and helpless in the house all day, whilst she is dancing off to Colchester market with her beau—cousin indeed! What do you think, master—I don't know your name.'

'Elijah Rebow, of Red Hall.'

'What do you think, Master Rebow? That cousin has been staying here a month, a whole calendar month. He has been given the best room, and there have been junketings without number; they have ate all the oysters out of my pan, and drank up all my old stout, and broken the necks of half the whisky bottles in my cellar, and smoked out all my havannahs. I have a few boxes, and indulge myself occasionally in a good cigar, they come costly. Well, will you believe me! Admonition routs out all my boxes, and gives her beau a havannah twice a day or more

often, as he likes, and I haven't had one between my lips since he came inside my doors. That lot of old Scotch whisky I had down from Dundee is all drunk out. Before I married her, Admonition would touch nothing but water, and tea very weak only coloured with the leaf; now she sucks stout and rum punch and whisky like a fish. It is a wonder to me she don't smoke too.'

The cripple tucked his recovered crutches under his arms, rolled himself off his chair, and stumped vehemently half a dozen times round the room. He returned at length, out of breath and very hot, to his chair, into which he cast himself.

'Put up my legs, please,' he begged of Elijah. 'There!' he said, 'I have worked off my excitement a little. Now go into the hall and look in the box under the stairs, there you will find an Union Jack. Run it up to the top of the mast. I don't care. I will defy her. When that girl who came here the other day—I forget her name—sees the flag flying she will come and help me. If Admonition has cousins, so have I, and mine are real cousins. I doubt but those of Admonition are nothing of the sort. If that girl——'

'What girl?' asked Rebow gloomily, as he

folded his arms across his breast, and scowled at Charles Pettican.

'I don't know her name, but it is written down. I have it in my note-book—Ah! Mehalah Sharland. She is my cousin, her mother is my cousin. I'll tell you what I will do, master. But before I say another word, you go up for me into the best bed-room—the blue room, and chuck that fellow's things out of the window over the balcony, and let the gull have the pecking and tearing of them to pieces. I know he has his best jacket on his back; more's the pity. I should like the gull to have the clawing and the beaking of that, but he can make a tidy mess of his other traps; and will do it.'

'Glory——' began Elijah.

'Ah! you are right there,' said Pettican. 'It will be glory to have routed Cousin Timothy out of the house; and if the flag flies, my cousin—I forget her name—Oh! I see, Mehalah—will come here and bring her mother, and before Master Timothy returns with Admonition from market—they are going to have a shilling's worth on a merry-go-round, I heard them scheme it—my cousins will be in possession, and cousin Timothy must content himself with the balcony, or cruise off.'

'Glory—or Mehalah, as you call her.'

'I'll not listen to another word, till you have chucked that fellow's traps overboard. There's a portmantle of his up there, chuck that over with the rest, and let the gull have the opening and examination of the contents.'

There was nothing for it but compliance, if Elijah wished to speak on the object of his visit. The old man was in an excited condition which would not allow him to compose his mind till his caprices were attended to, and his orders carried out. Rebow accordingly went upstairs and emptied the room of all evidences of its having been occupied. There was a discharge of boots, brush, clothes, pipes, into the garden, at which Pettican rubbed his hands and clucked like a fowl.

Rebow returned to the parlour, and the old shipbuilder was profuse in his thanks. 'Now,' said he,' run the flag up. You haven't done that yet. Then come and have a glass of spirits. There is some of the whisky left, not many bottles, but there is some, and not locked up, for Admonition thought she had me safe when she hoisted my crutches up the mast-head. Go now and let the bunting float as of old in my halcyon days.' This was also done; the wind took, un-

furled, and flapped the Union Jack, and the old man crowed with delight, and swung his arms.

'That is right. I haven't seen it fly for many months; not since I was married. Now that girl, I forget her name, Oh! I have it here—Mehalah—will see it, and come to the rescue. Do you know her?'

'What, Glory?'

'That ain't her name. Her name is—is—Mehalah.'

'We call her Glory. She is the girl. I know her,' he laughed and his eyes glittered. He set his teeth. Charles Pettican looked at him, and thought he had never seen a more forbidding countenance. He was frightened, and asked hastily,

'Who are you?'

'I am Elijah Rebow, of Red Hall.'

'I don't know you or the place.'

'I am in Salcott and Virley. You know me by name.'

'Oh! perhaps I do. My memory is not what it once was. I get so put out by my wife's whimsies that I can't collect my faculties all at once. I think I may have heard of you, but I haven't met you before.'

'I am the landlord of Glory—Mehalah, you call her. The Ray, which is their farm, belongs to me, with all the marshes and the saltings, and all that thereon is. I bought it for eight hundred pounds. Glory and her mother are mine.'

'I don't understand you.'

'I bought the land, and the farm, and them, a job lot, for eight hundred pounds.'

'I remember, the girl—I forget her name, but I have it here, written down——'

'Glory!'

'No, not that, Mehalah. I wish you wouldn't call her what she is not, because it confuses me; and I have had a deal to confuse me lately. Marriage does rummage a man's hold up so. Mehalah came here a few weeks back to ask me to lend her some money, as her mother could not pay the rent. Her mother is my cousin, Liddy Vince that was, I used to call her "Pretty Liddy," or Lydia Languish, after a character in a play, because of her ague, and because she sort of languished of love for me. And I don't deny it, I was sweet on her once, but the ague shivers stood in the way of our love waxing wery hot.'

'You lent her the money.'

'I—I——' hesitated Mr. Pettican. 'You see how I am circumstanced, my wife——'

'You lent her the money. Mistress Sharland told me so.'

'She did!' exclaimed Pettican in surprise.

'Yes, she did. Now I want to know, will you do that again. I am landlord. I bought the Ray for eight hundred pounds, and I don't want to drop my money without a return. You understand that. A man doesn't want to give his gold away, and be whined out of getting interest for it by an old shivering, chattering woman, and flouted out of it by a devil of a girl.' His hands clenched fiercely.

'Of course, of course,' said the cripple. 'I understand you. You think those two can't manage the farm, and were better out of it.'

'I want to be sure of my money,' said Elijah, knitting his dark brows, and fixing his eyes intently on Pettican.

'I quite understand,' said the latter, and tapping his forehead, he added, 'I am a man of business still. I am not so old as all that, whatever Admonition may say.'

'Now what I want to know,' pursued Elijah, 'is this—for how long are you going to pay

your cousin's rent? For how long is that Glory to come to me and defy me, and throw the money down before me?'

'I don't quite take you,' said Pettican.

'How many times will you pay their rent?' asked Rebow.

'Well!' said the cripple, passing his hand over his face. 'I don't want them to stay at your farm at all. I want them to come here and take care of me. I cannot defend myself. If I try to be a man—that girl, I forget her name, you confuse me about it—told me to be a man, and I will be a man, if she will back me up. I have been a man somewhat, have I not, master, in chucking cousin Timothy's traps to the gull—that I call manly. You will see the girl—Mehalah—I have the name now. I will keep my note-book open at the place. Mehalah, Mehalah, Mehalah, Mehalah.'

'I want to know——' broke in Elijah.

'Let me repeat the name ten times, and then I shall not forget it again.' Pettican did so. 'You called her something else. Perhaps we are not speaking of the same person.'

'Yes, we are. I call her Glory. I am accus-

tomed to that name. Tell me what you want with her.'

'I want her and her mother to come and live with me, and take care of me, and then I can be a man, and make head against the wind that is now blowing in my teeth. Shall you see them?'

'Yes.'

'To-day?'

'Perhaps.'

'Then pray make a point of seeing the girl or her mother, in case she should not notice the flag, and say that I wish them to come here at once; at once it must be, or I shall never have courage to play the man again, not as I have to-day. They did put my monkey up by removing my crutches and hoisting them to the mast-head, leaving me all by myself and helpless here. I should wish Mehalah to be here before Admonition and her beau return. They won't be back till late. There's a horsemanship at Colchester as well as a merry-go-round, and they are going to both, and perhaps to the theatre after that. There'll be junketings and racketings, and I—poor I—left here with no one to attend to me, and my crutches at the mast-head. You will tell the girl and her mother that I expect their help,

and I will be a man, that I will. It would be something to boast of, would it not, if Timothy were to return and find his room occupied and his baggage picked to rags, and if Admonition were to discover that I have cousins as well as she?'

'You are bent on this?'

'I rely on you. You will see them and tell them to come to me, and I will provide for them whilst I am alive, and afterwards—when I am no more—we won't talk or think of such an eventuality. It isn't pleasant to contemplate, and may not happen for many years. I am not so old as you might think. My infirmity is due to accident; and my digestion is, or rather was, first-rate. I could eat and drink anything before I was married. Now I am condemned to see others eat and drink what I have laid in for my own consumption, and I am put off with the drumstick of the fowl, or the poorest swipes o ale, whilst the others toss off my stout—bottled stout. I will not endure this any longer. Tel that girl—I forget her name—and her mothe that they must come to me.'

'But suppose they will not come.'

'They will, I know they will. The femal

heart is tender and sympathetic, and compassionates misery. My suffering will induce them to come. If that will not, why then the prospects of being comfortably off and free from cares will make them come. I have plenty of money. I won't tell you, I have not told Admonition, how much. I have money in the Colchester Bank. I have South Sea shares, and insurances, and mortgages, and I shall not let Admonition have more money than I can help, as it all goes on cousin Timothy, and whirligigs and horsemanships, or regattas, and red ribands, and what not; none is spent on me. No, no. The Sharlands shall have my money. They are my cousins. I have cousins as well as Admonition. I will be a man and show that I have courage too. But I have another inducement that will be sure to bring them.'

'What is that?'

'I have observed,' said Pettican, with a hiccuppy giggle, 'that just as tom-cats will range all over the country in search of other tom-cats, just for the pleasure of clawing them and tearing out their hair, so women will hunt the whole country side for other women, if there be a chance of fighting them. Tell my cousin Liddy that Admonition is game, she has teeth, and tongue,

and nails, and sets up her back in a corner, and likes a scrimmage above everything, and my word for it, Liddy—unless the ague has taken the female nature out of her—will be here before nightfall to try her teeth, and tongue, and nails on Admonition. It is said that if on a May morning you rub your eyes with cuckoo spittle, you see things invisible before, the fairies in the hoes dancing and feasting, swimming in egg-shells on the water to bore holes in ships' sides, milking the cows before the maids come with the pail, and stealing the honey from the hives. Well, marriage does much the same sort of thing to a man as salving his eyes in cuckoo spittle; it affords him a vision of a world undreamt of before; it gives him an insight into what is going on in the female world, and the workings and brewings and the mischief in women's hearts. Tell Liddy Sharland about my Admonition, and she will be here, with all her guns run out and ready charged, before nightfall.'

Rebow shook his head. 'Mistress Sharland and Glory won't come.'

'Don't say so. They must, or I shall be undone. I cannot live as I have, tyrannised over, insulted, trampled on by Admonition and her

cousin. I will no longer endure it. The flag is flying. I have proclaimed my independence and defiance. But, as you see, I am unable to live alone. If Liddy and her daughter will not come to me, I shall be driven to do something desperate. My life has become intolerable, I will bear with Admonition no longer.'

'What will you do?' asked Elijah with a sneer.

'I tell you, I do not care. I am reckless, I will even fire the house, and burn it over their heads.'

'What good would that do?'

'What good would it do?' repeated Pettican. 'It would no longer be a shelter for Admonition and that beau Timothy. I am not going to be trifled with, I have endured too much. I will be a man. I shouldn't mind a bit smoking them out of this snug lair.'

'And what about yourself?'

'Oh, as for me, I could go to the Blue Anchor, and put up there for the rest of my days. I think I could be happy in a tavern, happier than here, and I should have the satisfaction of thinking I had shaken the weevils out of the biscuit.'

Elijah started, and strode up and down the room, with head bent, and his eyes fixed on the floor. His hands were clenched and rigid at his side.

'You will tell Liddy,' said the cripple, watching him.

'Smoke them out! Ha! ha! that is a fine idea!' burst forth from Elijah, with a laugh.

'You will tell Liddy,' repeated Charles Pettican. 'You must, you know, or I am lost. If Admonition were to return with Timothy at her heels, and were to find the flag flying, and me alone——' he passed his agitated hand over his face, and his lips trembled.

'I see,' said Rebow. 'You would then cease to be a man.'

It was late when Admonition and her cousin returned from the market. It was so dark that they did not see the flag. But as Admonition put her hand on the gate it was grasped.

'Stop,' said Elijah. 'A word with you.'

'Who are you?' asked Mrs. Pettican in alarm, and Timothy swaggered forward to her defence.

'Never mind who I am. I have waited here some hours to warn you. Was there a girl, a handsome girl, a glorious girl, here to see that

man, your husband, a month ago? You need not answer. I know there was. She is his cousin. He lent her money.'

'No, he did not. I stopped that, didn't I, Tim?'

'He lent her money. You think you stopped that, but you did not. He let her have the money, twenty pounds, how I know not. She had his money, and she will have more, *all*, unless you keep a sharp watch on him.'

'Tim! do you hear this?' asked Admonition.

'He will send for his cousin to live in the house with him, and to support him against you.'

'Oh, ho! That's fine, isn't it, Tim?'

'If they come, your reign is at an end. That girl, Glory, has a head of iron and the heart of a lion. No one can stand against her but one. There is only one in all the world has dared to conquer her, and he will do it yet. Don't you think you will be able to lift a little finger against her will. She will be too strong for you and a hundred of your Timothys.'

Admonition laughed. 'My little mannikin daren't do it. He is under my thumb.'

'The flag is flying,' sneered Elijah.

At that moment the faint light of evening broke through the clouds and Admonition saw the Union Jack at the mast-head.

'He is right. There is audacity! Run, Tim, haul it down, and bring it me. It shall go into the kitchen fire to boil the water for a glass of grog.'

CHAPTER XIV.

ON THE BURNT HILL.

It was Christmas Eve. A hard frost had set in. The leaves which had hung on the thorn trees on the Ray, rained off and were whirled away by the wind and scattered over the rising and falling waters in the Rhyn. On the saltings were many pools, filled from below, through crab burrows, from the channels; when the tide mounted, the water squirted up through these passages and brimmed the pools, and when the tide fell, it was sucked down through them as if running out of a colander. Now a thin film of ice was formed about the edges of these pondlets, and the marsh herbs that dipped in them were encased in crystal. The wild geese and ducks came in multitudes, and dappled the water of Mersea channel.

'There's four gone,' said Abraham Dowsing in a sulky voice to Mehalah.

'Four what?'

'Four ewes to be sure, of what else have we more than one?'

'Where are they?'

'That is what I should like to know. Two went yesterday, but I said nothing about it, as I thought they might be found, or that I hadn't counted aright; but there's two more missing to-day.'

'What can have become of them?'

'It's no use asking me. Is it like I should know?'

'But this is most extraordinary. They must have wandered off the saltings, on to the causeway, and so got away.'

'That is likely, ain't it,' said Abraham. 'It is like the ways of sheep, to scatter, and two or three to go off and away from all the flock. I'll believe that when sheep change their nature.'

'They must have fallen into a pool and been drowned.'

'Then I should find their carcases; but I haven't. Perhaps there has been a spring tide at the wrong time of the year and overflowed and drowned them. That's likely, isn't it?'

'But, Abraham, they must be found.'

'Then you must find 'em yourself.'

'Where can they be?'

'I've told you it is no use asking me.'

'Can they have been stolen?'

'I reckon that is just about it.'

'Stolen!' exclaimed Mehalah, her blood flashing to her face and darkening cheek and brow. 'Do you mean to tell me that some scoundrel has been here in the night, and carried off four of our ewes?'

Abraham shrugged his shoulders; 'Mud tells tales at times.'

Mehalah trembled with anger.

'Some boat was here last night, and night afore, and the keel marks remain. I saw them, and I saw footprints of sheep too, near them.'

'When?'

'The tide is up, and you can't see. Near the Burnt Hill.'

'Abraham, this is not to be borne.'

'Who is to help it?'

'I will. I will watch,' she stamped her foot fiercely on the red glasswort; 'I will kill the cowardly sneaking thief who comes here to rob the widow and the orphan.'

'You must see him first,' said Abraham, 'and

sheep-stealers don't generally let themselves be seen.'

'A man who steals sheep can be hung for it.'

'Yes.'

'I'll catch him,' she laughed, 'and the gallows will be set up on the Burnt Hill, and then he shall dangle till his bones drop away into the ooze.'

'You must catch him first,' said the shepherd, and shrugged his shoulders again.

Mehalah strode up and down in the marsh, her brows knit, and the veins swollen on her temples. She breathed fast and her blood sang in her ears. To be robbed in this cowardly manner! The thought was maddening. Hitherto she and her mother had deemed themselves perfectly safe on the Ray; nothing had ever been taken from them; the ooze and the seawater walled them in. The Ray was a trap from which there was no escape save by boat. It was said that once a deserter found his way into Mersea Isle and lingered about the marshes for many days. He dared not return by the causeway, thinking it would be watched and he would be secured, and he had no money wherewith to bribe a boatman to put him across elsewhere. One evening he lit on a farmer with a spade over his shoulder going to the sea

wall to block a rent against an expected tide. He fell on the man from behind, wrenched away his spade and cut his head open with it, then turned out his pockets in search of coin, but found none. The man was taken. He could not escape, and was hung on the marshes where the murder was done, by the mouth of the Pyefleet.

If Mersea was a trap, how much more so the Ray. The Sharlands had not even a lock to their door. No one was ever seen on the island after dark save those who dwelt there, for the hill was surrounded on all sides, save where girt by the sea, by a labyrinth of creeks and pools. A robber there would be like a fly in a cobweb, to be caught at once. The sheep were allowed to ramble all over the marsh and saltings, they could thread their way; and it was only when the moon was full or new, and the wind in the south-east that the shepherd drove them into fold till the waters subsided. There were times,—such as the coincidence of a peculiar wind with an equinoctial tide—when to leave the sheep on the marsh would be to ensure their being drowned. This was so well known, that precaution was always taken against the occasion.

The sense of being treated unjustly, of being

cruelly wronged, of advantage being taken of their feebleness, filled Mehalah's heart with bitterness, with rage. An over-mastering desire for revenge came upon her. She, a girl, would defend her property, and chastise the man who injured her. She gave up all thought of obtaining the assistance of Abraham, if it ever entered her mind. The old man was too slow in his movements, and dull of sight and hearing, to be of use. As likely as not, moreover, he would refuse to risk himself on the saltings at night, to expose himself to the ague damp or the bullet. What could he, a feeble old loon, do against a sturdy sheep-stealer?

'Whom do you suspect?' asked Glory abruptly.

He drew up his shoulders.

'Come, tell me.'

'An empty belly.'

'Abraham! one man cannot have taken four sheep for himself.'

Another shrug.

There was nothing to be got out of the dogged rustic. Mehalah waited till evening, then she wrapped a cloak round her, put her pistol in her belt, and walked through the marsh to the point indicated by the shepherd as the Burnt Hill.

Through all the low flat coast land of this region, above the saltings, or pasture overflowed by high tides occasionally, are scattered at irregular intervals large broad circular mounds of clay burned to brick red, interspersed with particles of charcoal. A few fragments of bone are found in them, relics of the meals of those who raised these heaps, but they cover no urns, and enclose no cists, they contain no skeletons. They were never intended as funeral monuments, and are quite different from the hoes or barrows which stand on high land, and which were burial mounds. The burnt or red hills are always situate at high-water mark; near them, below the surface of the vegetable deposit, are multitudes of oyster shells. Near them also are sometimes found, sunk in the marsh, polished chert weapons. Who raised these mounds? For what purpose were they reared? These are questions that cannot be answered satisfactorily. One thing is certain. An immense amount of wood must have been consumed to burn such a mass of clay, and the country must then have been more overgrown with timber than at present. Many of the mounds are now enclosed in fields by seawalls which hold out the tide, the plough has been drawn over them, and the spade

has scattered them over the surface, colouring a whole field brick red, and making it rich for the production of corn. There is no better manure than a red hill.

But why were these mounds so laboriously raised? The tradition of the marsh-dwellers is that they were platforms for huts, the earth burned as a prevention to ague. It is curious that in the marshy regions of Central Africa the natives adopt a precisely similar method for their protection from miasma. But why men dwelt in such numbers on the saltings remains undetermined. Whether they lived there to burn the glasswort for nitre, or to steam the sea water for salt, or to take charge of oyster grounds, is uncertain. Fragments, very broken, of pottery are found in these heaps, scattered throughout them, but not a specimen of a perfect vessel. The burnt hills are built up on the old shingle of the shore, with no intervening line of vegetable matter, the growth of the marsh has been later and has risen about their bases and has partly buried them.

Glory reached the Burnt Hill, and stood on it. A cold east wind wailed over the waste; a white fog like curd lay on the water, and the surface of the saltings, clinging to the surface and rising

scarce above three feet from it. Here and there it lifted itself in a vaporous column, and moved along in the wind like a white spectral woman, nodding her head and waving her arms cumbered with wet drapery. Above, the sky was clear, and a fine crescent moon sparkled in it without quenching the keenness of the stars. Cassiopeia was glorious in her chair, Orion burned sideways over Mersea Isle. No red gleam was visible to-night from the tavern window at the City, the veil of fog hung over it and curtained it off. To the north-west was a silvery glow at the horizon, then there rose a pure ray as of returning daylight, it was answered by a throb in the north-east, then it broke into two rays, and again united and spread, and suddenly was withdrawn. Mehalah had often seen the Aurora, and she knew that the signals portended increased cold or bad weather.

She seated herself on the mound, and drew her cloak about her more closely, the damp cold bit into her flesh; she knew she was safe from ague on the burnt earth.

Her anger subsided, not that she resented the wrong the less, but that her mind had passed to other contemplations. She was thinking of George, of her dead hopes, of the blankness of the future

before her. A little sunlight had fallen on her sad and monotonous life, but it had been withdrawn, and had left her with nothing to live for, save her mother. Her heart had begun to expand as a flower, and a frost had fallen on it, and blackened its petals. She brooded now on the past. She wished for nothing in the future. She had no care for the present. It was all one to her what befel her, so long as her mother were cared for. She had no one else to love. She was without a friend. She would resent an injury, and fight an enemy. George might have introduced her into a new world of gentleness, and pity, and love. Now the door to that world was shut for ever, and she must beat her way through a world of hard realities, where every man's hand was lifted against his brother, and where was hate and resentment, and exacting of the uttermost farthing. She had gone forth seeking help, and except from George, had found none. Mrs. De Witt, Phœbe Musset, Admonition, such were the women she had met; and the men were selfish as Parson Till, fools as Charles Pettican, surly as Abraham Dowsing, or brutal as Elijah Rebow.

Hark!—She caught the dip of an oar.

She drew in her breath and raised her head.

Then she saw a boat shoot out of the mist, white and ghostlike as the mist forms that stalked over the water, and in the boat a man.

There he was! The sheep-stealer, come once more to rob her mother and herself. At once her furious passion boiled up in her veins. She saw before her the man who had wronged her; she thought nothing of her own weakness beside his strength, of there being no one within call to come to her aid, should his arm be stouter than hers. She sprang to her feet with a shout, such as an Indian might utter on leaping on his foe, and rushed to the water's edge, just as the man had landed, and had her hands at his throat in a moment.

'You coward, you thief!' she cried shaking him savagely.

'Glory!'

In an instant a pair of stronger hands had wrenched her hands away and pinioned them.

'By heaven! you wild cat, what are you flying at me like that for? What has brought you here at this time of night?'

Mehalah was abashed. Her rage sank. She had mistaken her man. This was no sheep-stealer. She could not speak, so great was her agitation.

She writhed to free herself, but writhed in vain. Elijah laughed at her attempts.

'What are you here for?' he asked again. 'Can you not answer my question?'

'Some one has been stealing our ewes,' she said.

'And you took me for the thief,' said Rebow. 'Much obliged for the compliment. *Me*—the owner of Red Hall, and the man that purchased the Ray, the farm house, and the marshes and the saltings and all that thereon is for eight hundred pounds, to be taken and hanged for sheep-lifting! A likely story, Glory. You must manage better another time.'

'What brings you here?' asked Mehalah sullenly, angry with herself and with him.

'That is the question I asked of you, and you return it. I will tell you. I am out duck-shooting, but the mist lies so thick on the water, and eats into the marrow of the bones. I could see no ducks, and I was freezing in my punt; so I have come to lie with my gun on the Burnt Hill awhile till the fog clears, as it will in an hour, when I shall return.'

'Were you here yesterday night?'

'No, I was not; I was up Tottesbury creek and

got a dozen pair of wild duck. Will you have some? I have a pair or two in the punt.'

'I have refused them before, and I refuse them again.'

'Why do you ask me if I were here yesternight?'

'Because then two sheep were taken. Were you here the night before?'

'No, I was then on Abbots' Hall marshes. Do you suspect me still of sheep-stealing?' he asked scoffingly.

'I do not, but I thought had you been here you might have seen some signs of the villains who have robbed us.'

'Come here, Glory! out of the fog on to the Burnt Hill.'

'I am going home.'

'You are not, till I have said what I have to say. Come out of the ague damps.'

'I am going home, now.'

He held her by both wrists. She was strong, but her strength was nothing to his. She made no great effort to get away. If he chose to speak to her, she would listen to him. If she struggled in his grasp, it would make him think she feared him. She would not allow him to suppose him-

self of such importance to her. If he insulted her, she had her pistol, and she would not scruple to defend herself.

He drew her to the top of the mount; there they were clear of the mist, which lay like snow below and round them, covering the morass and the water. The clear cut crescent moon hung over a clump of pines on Mersea. Rebow looked at it, then waved an arm in the direction.

'Do you see Grim's Hoe yonder?—That great barrow with the Scotch pines on top? Do you know how it comes there? Have you heard the tale?'

Mehalah was silent.

'I will tell you, for I often think of it, and so will you when you have been told the tale. In the old times when the Danes came here, they wintered on Mersea Isle, and in the summer they cruised all along the coast, burning and plundering and murdering. There were two chiefs to them, brothers, who loved one another, they were twins, born the same hour, and they had but one heart and soul; what one willed that willed the other, what one desired that the other desired also. One spring they sailed up the creek to St. Osyth's, and there they took Osyth and killed her. She

had a sister, very beautiful, and she fell to the lot of the brothers. They brought her back to Mersea, and then each would have her for his own. So the brothers fell out whose she should be, and all their love turned to jealousy, and their brotherhood to enmity, and it came about that they fought with their long swords who should have the maid. They fought, and smote, and hacked one another till their armour was broken, and their flesh was cut off, and their blood flowed away, and by nightfall they were both dead. Thereupon the Danes drew their ship up to the top of the hill just above the Strood, and they placed the maid in the hold with a dead brother on either side of her, in his tattered harness, sword in hand, and they heaped a mountain over them and buried them all, the living and the dead together.'

Rebow paused, and pointed to the moon hung over the hoe.

'When the new moon appears, the flesh grows on their bones, and the blood stanches, and the wounds close, and breath comes back behind their ribs. When the moon is full they rise in the ship's hold and fall on one another, and if you listen at full moon on the hoe you can hear the brothers fighting below in the heart of the

barrow. You hear them curse and cry out, and you hear the clash of their swords. But when the moon wanes the sounds grow fainter, their armour falls to bits, their flesh drops away, the blood oozes out of all the hacked veins, and at last all is still. Then, when there is no moon, you can hear the maid mourning and sobbing: you can hear her quite distinctly till the new moon reappears, and then she is hushed, for the brothers are recovering for a new fight. This will go on month after month, year after year, till one conquers the other and wins the maid; but that will never be, for the brothers are of the same age, and equally strong, and equally resolute.'

'Why have you told me this?' asked Mehalah.

'Why have I told you this, Glory?' repeated Rebow; 'because you and I are like those brothers, only they began with love and ended with fighting, and you and I begin with fighting and must and shall end with love. I love you, Glory, and yet, at times, I almost hate you.'

'And I,' broke in Mehalah, 'hate you with my whole heart, and never, never can love you.'

'You have a strong spirit, so have I,' said

Elijah; 'I like to hear you speak thus. For long you have let me see that you have hated me: you have fought me hard, but you shall love me yet. We must fight, Glory; it is our destiny. We were made for one another, to love and fight, and fight and love, till one has conquered or killed the other. How can you live at the Ray, and I at Red Hall, apart? You know, you feel it, that we must be together to love and fight, and fight and love, till death. What is the use of your struggling against what must come about? As soon as ever I saw you I knew that you were ordained for me from the moment you were born. You grew up and ripened for me, for me, and no one else. You thought you loved George De Witt. I hated you for loving him. He was not worthy of you, a poor, foolish, frightened sop. You would have taken him and turned him inside out and torn him to pieces, in a week, disgusted with the fellow that made calf-love to you, when you had sounded his soul and found a bottom as soon as the lead went out of your hand. You thought George De Witt would belong to you. It could not be. You cannot oppose your destiny. A strong soul like yours must not mate but with a strong soul like mine. Till I saw you

I hated women, poor, thin-headed, hollow-souled toys. When I saw you I saw the only woman who could be mine, and I knew, as the pointers yonder know the polestar, that you were destined to me. You hate me because you know this as well as I do. You know that there is no man on earth who can be yours save me, but you will play and fight with your destiny. Sooner or later you must bend to it. Sooner or later you must give way. You thought of George De Witt, and he is swept out of your path. You may fancy any other man, and he will go this way or that, and nothing will prosper till you set your face in the direction whither your destiny points. You can take no other than me, however much you may desire it. You need me and I need you. You may hate me and go on hating me and fighting me to the last, but you cannot escape me.'

'Elijah,' said Mehalah, 'escape you I will. Since I have known you, you have been mixed up with all the ills that have come upon us, I do not know how; but I seem to feel that you are like an evil wind or a blighting cloud passing over my life. I would look up and laugh, but I cannot, I turn hard, and hate the world—only because

you are in it. It would be another world without you.'

'Why do you turn hard and hate the world? Because you are on a wrong road, you are battling against your destiny. All goes across with you, because you are across your proper path. Why do you hate me? Because you feel in your soul that you must sooner or later be mine, and your haughty will rebels against having your future determined for you. Yet I know it. The time is at hand when you will take me for better, for worse, for all life. We cannot live a moment the one without the other. If I were to die you would die too, you would rage and writhe against death, but it would come. I know it. Our lives are bound up together in one bundle, and the knife that cuts one string cuts the other also. Our souls are twins to love and to hate, to fondle and fight, till death us do part! Till death us do part!' repeated Rebow scornfully. 'Death can no more part us than life. We will live together and we will die together, and moulder away in one another's arms. The worm that gnaws me shall gnaw you. I think of you night and day. I cannot help it: it is my fate. I knew it was so the moment I saw you. I came

here. I cannot keep away till you come to me to Red Hall.'

'I shall never go there again,' said Mehalah sullenly.

'Not before New Year?'

'Never.'

He laughed. 'She would swear to it, and yet at the New Year she will be there. And she will take me and be mine. For me she must and will love. It is her fate: she cannot oppose that for ever. For me she would even give up George De Witt.'

'George De Witt is dead.'

'I say, were it to come to this, George or Elijah, one or the other, you would fly to Elijah and cast George off.'

'Let me go. I will have no more of this mad babble,' said Mehalah, wrenching her hands out of his grasp. She would not run away. She was too proud. She folded her arms on her breast and confronted him.

'Hark!' she said, 'the Christmas bells.'

Faint and far off could be heard the merry pealing of the Colchester bells. The wind had shifted.

'Peace on earth and good will to men,'

muttered Elijah; 'but to them that fight against their destiny fury and hate.'

'Go back, Elijah, and speak to me no more on this matter. I will not hear you again. I have but endured it now.'

'This is Christmas Eve,' said Rebow. 'In eight days is the New Year, and then you will be in Red Hall, Glory!'

'Listen to me, Elijah,' exclaimed Mehalah passionately. 'If you find me there, then you may hope to see your other fond dream fulfilled. Destiny will have been too strong for me.'

'Farewell.'

'May we not meet again.'

'We shall. It cannot be helped. I feel it coming. You may fight against it; you cannot escape. Destiny must fulfil itself. We must fight and love, and love and fight in life, in death, and through eternity, like the old warriors in Grim's Hoe.'

'Farewell.'

'Till this day sen'night.'

CHAPTER XV.

NEW YEAR'S EVE.

No more sheep were stolen; but then the moon was filling her horns, and a robbery could not be committed without chance of detection. But though nothing farther had been taken, Mehalah was uneasy. Some evilly-disposed person had visited the Ray and plundered her and her mother of four ewes; others, or the same, might attempt the house, in the hopes of finding money there. The auction had shown people that Mistress Sharland was not without money.

On New Year's Eve Mehalah went to Colchester to make some purchases for the New Year. The kalends of January and not the Nativity of Christ is the great winter festival among the Essex peasantry on the coast. They never think of wishing one another a Happy Christmas, but only a Merry New Year. No yule log is burnt, no mummers dance, no wassail

bowl is consumed at Christmas, but each man who can afford it deems himself bound to riot and revel, to boose and sing, to wake the death of the old year, and baptise the new with libations of brandy or ale.

When Mehalah returned, she brought with her a new lock and key for the house-door. There had been once a lock there, but it had been broken many years ago, and had never been repaired. On the Ray no lock was needed, it had been supposed. Mehalah was of a different opinion now. The short day had closed some time ago: she had seen it die over Bradwell from Abberton Hill, but the full moon was rising, and she knew her way over the marshes, she could thread the tangle easily by moonlight. She reached the Ray, threw open the door, and strode in. Her mother was by the fire, with her head on the table. Mehalah's heart stood still for a moment, and then her face flushed. The smell of spirits in the close room, the attitude of her mother, the stupefied eyes which opened on her, and then closed again without recognition, convinced her that her mother had been drinking.

Mehalah was angry as well as distressed. This was a new trouble, one to which she was quite

unaccustomed. She knew that her mother had taken a little rum and water against her ague, and she had not grudged it her. But of late there had been something more than this. Since Rebow had supplied Mrs. Sharland with spirits, the old woman had been unable to resist the temptation of going to her keg whenever she felt lonely or depressed. Mehalah had insisted on her mother receiving no more from Elijah Rebow, but she was by no means certain that the widow had complied with her desire. The sight of her mother in this condition angered Mehalah, for she was sure now that a fresh supply had been obtained, and was secreted somewhere. She was angry with her mother for deceiving her and with Rebow for tempting the old woman and laying her under an obligation to him. She was angry with herself for not having watched her mother more closely, and explored the places of concealment which abounded in the old house.

She stood over her mother for some moments with folded arms and bowed head, her brows knit, and a gloomy light in her eyes. Then she shook her roughly and spoke harshly to her.

'Mother! answer me. You have received more from Rebow?'

'It was very kind, very kind indeed,' stuttered the old woman. 'Capital for ague shivers and rheumatic pains in the bones.'

'Has Elijah been here again?'

'He's wery civil; he knows what suits old bones.'

'Has he brought you another keg?'

'It is stowed away,' said the widow drowsily. 'Quite comfortable. Go to bed, Mehalah, it's time to get up.'

The girl drew back in disgust and wrath. Elijah was making her own mother despicable in her eyes. She was quite resolved what to do. She thrust open the door to the cellar, and behind a heap of faggots found a fresh keg, evidently recently brought, and quite full. She drew it forth into the front room and held it up.

'Mother!' she shouted.

'I am here, Mehalah. The ague isn't on me yet.'

'Do you see this little cask? It is full, quite full.'

'Don't do that, child, you may drop it.'

'I shall dash it to pieces,' said the girl, and she flung it with her whole force on the bricks. A stave was broken: the precious liquor spurted

out. Some flew into the fire and flashed into blue flame up the chimney. In a moment the floor was swimming, and the thirsty bricks were sucking in the spirit. The old woman was too besotted with drink to understand what was done. Mehalah's bosom heaved with passion and excitement.

'I have done with that,' she said; 'I said that I would, and I have kept my word. Never, never shall my poor mother be like this again. He did it.' She knit her hands, and a fire flickered in her eye, like that of the burning spirit in the chimney.

'Now come to bed, mother.' She drew or carried the old woman out of the room, undressed her, and put her in bed. Mrs. Sharland made no resistance. She submitted drowsily, and her head was no sooner on the pillow than she fell asleep.

Mehalah returned to the front room. She got out some tools, and set herself to work at once to fasten on the lock. She was accustomed to doing all sorts of things herself; she could roughly carpenter, she had often patched her boat. The old farmhouse was in a decayed condition and needed much mending, and for several

years she had done what was required to it. To put on a lock was a trifle; but the old nails that had fastened the former lock remained in the wood, and had to be punched out, and the key-hole was not quite in the right place when the lock was first put on, and had to be altered. At length the lock was fast, a strong lock, strong for such a worm-eaten door.

Mehalah went to her mother's room and looked at the old woman. She slept heavily, unlike her usual sleep, which would be broken at once by the entry of her daughter with a light.

Mehalah returned to the kitchen and seated herself at the hearth. How long had this keg of spirits been in the house? She had paid no attention to the introduction of spirits since George's death, her mind had been occupied with other matters. Her mother and Rebow had taken advantage of this. How was it that Rebow came to the house when she was away? He never came when she was present, at least not since the night when the money was stolen; but she was sure that he visited her mother during her absence, from little things let drop by the old woman.

How did he manage to time his visits so as not to meet her? She would find out when he was last at the Ray Farm. She sprang up, and went out of the door, unlocking it to let herself go forth; and she called Abraham. There was no answer. The old man was already turned into his loft over the cowhouse, and asleep.

She called him again, but with equal want of success. Not a thunderbolt falling on the thorns beside the house would rouse him. Mehalah knew that, and went back to her seat by the fire, relocking the door. 'I will ask him in the morning. He must know.'

She drew off her shoes, and put her bare feet on the warm hearth. She was without her guernsey and cap, for she did not wear them when she went to Colchester.

She fell, as was her wont, to thinking. Since the death of George, she had been accustomed to sit thus over the fire, after her mother had retired. She was not thinking of him now, she was thinking of Elijah. His words, his strange, mad, fierce words, came back to her. Was there a destiny shaping her life against her will, and forcing her into his arms? She shuddered at the thought. To hate and love,

and love and hate, year out, year in, that was what they were fated to do, according to him. That he was drawn towards her by some attractive power exercised against her will, she knew full well, but she would not allow that he exercised the least attraction on her. Yet she did feel that there was some sort of spell upon her. Hate him as she did and would, she knew that she could not altogether escape him, she had an instinctive consciousness that she was held by him, she did not understand how, in his hands. Perhaps it was her destiny to hate and fight him; for how long? Love him she never could, she never would. There was an assurance in his manner and tone which impressed her against her better judgment. He spoke as though it were but a matter of time before she yielded herself wholly to him, and came under his roof and joined her lot with his, for life and for death. What right had he to assume this? What grounds had he for this confidence? None but a blind, dogged conviction in his own mind that destiny had ordained them for each other. Then she thought of the story of Grim's Hoe, of the two who loved and hated, embraced and fought eternally therein, those two destined from

their mother's womb to be together in life and death, with twin souls and bodies, who had they lived in love might have rested in death, but as they fought must fight on. There they were, in the old hollow womb of the ship down in the earth in darkness, loving one another as brothers, fighting each other as rivals; the conflict lasting till one shall master the other, a thing that never can be, for both were born with equal strength, and equal purpose, and equal stubbornness of will. The fumes of the spilled spirits hung in the air, and stimulated Mehalah's brain. Instead of stupefying, they quickened her mind into activity. Her heart beat. She felt as if she were in the ship hold watching the eternal conflict, and as if she must take a part with one or the other; as if her so doing would determine the victory. But which should she will to conquer, when each was the counterpart of the other? She could not bear this thought, she could not endure the fumes of the spirit, it suffocated her. She sprang up. The full moon was glaring in at the window from a cloudless sky.

She opened the door. The air was cold, but there was little wind. She could see on the

south-east horizon, at the highest point of the island, the great Hoe crowned with black pines.

The moon was at full. The old warriors were now hewing at one another, and the dim, frightened captive maid looked on with her hands on her heart, her great eyes gleaming like glow-worms in the decaying ship hold. Ha! at each sword stroke the sparks flashed. Ha! The cut flesh glimmered like phosphorescent fish, and the blood ran like blue fire. Was the story true? Could anyone hear the warriors shout and smite, who chose to listen at the full of the moon? The distance to Grim's Hoe was not over two miles. Mehalah thought she must go there and listen with her own ears. She would go.

Once more she returned to her mother's room, and saw that Mrs. Sharland was asleep. Then she drew on her shoes, her guernsey, and her red cap, went out, locked the door, and put the key in her pocket.

'Who went there?' She started. She thought she saw something—some one, move; but then laughed. The moon was so bright that it cast her shadow on the wall, distinct and black as if it were a palpable body. She stood

still listened, and looked round. She could see the stretch of the saltings as distinctly as if it were day, only that the shadows were inky black, not purple as by sunlight. Not a sound was to be heard.

'I will go,' she said, and she strode off towards the causeway.

The path over the marshes was perfectly distinct. She walked fast, the earth crackled under her feet, the frost was keen. Her eyes rose ever and anon to Grim's Hoe. The pines on it did not stir, they stood like mourners above a grave.

The Mersea channel gleamed like a belt of silver, not a ripple was on the water on the west side of the causeway, and but slight flapping wavelets, driven by the north-east wind, played with the tangles on the piles on the other side of the Strood.

She reached the island of Mersea by the causeway, now dry, and began to ascend the hill. Once she turned and looked back. She could see the Ray rising above the marshes, bathed in moonlight, patched with coal black shadows cast by the ancient thorn trees, and the farm buildings.

Before her rose the great barrow, partly overgrown with shrubs, but bare on the north-west towards the Strood. It was a bell-shaped mound rising some thirty feet above the surface of the ground. She paused a moment at the foot and listened. Not a sound. She must then climb the tumulus, and lie on the top between the pines, and lay her ear to the ground. She stepped boldly up the little path trodden by children and sheep, and in a few moments was at the top. She stopped to breathe, to look up at the wan white moon that gazed down on her, and then she cast herself on the ground, with her face to the north-west.

What was that? A fir cone fell beside her. There was no sound. Hist! a stoat ran past and disappeared in a hole. Then she heard screams. A poor rabbit was attacked and its blood sucked. She lifted her head, and then laid it on the ground again. Her eyes were fixed on the distance.

What was that? In a moment she was on her feet.

What was that red spot over the marshes, on the Ray, among the trees? What was that leaping, dancing, lambent tongue, shooting up and

recoiling? What was that white rising cloud above the thorns.

Before she knew where she was, Mehalah was flying down the hill towards the Strood, the dead Danish warriors forgotten in the agony of her fear. As she ran on, her eyes never left the Ray, and she saw the red light grow in intensity and spread in body. The farm was on fire. The house was on fire, and her mother was in a dead sleep within—locked in—and the key was in her pocket.

O God! what had she done? Why had she gone? Had not the spilled spirits caught fire and set the house in flames! Why had she locked her mother in? a thing never done before. Mehalah ran, terror, horror, anguish at her heart. She did not look at her path, she took it instinctively, she did not heed the rude bridges, she dashed across them, and one broke under her hasty foot, and fell away after she had passed. The flames were climbing higher. She could see them devouring the wooden tarred walls. Then came a great burst of fire, and a rushing upwards of blazing sparks. The roof had fallen in. A pillar of blue and golden light stood up and illumined the whole Ray. The thorn trees

looked now like wondrous, finely-ramified, golden sea-weeds in a dim blue sea. Mehalah would not pause to look at anything, she saw only flames leaping and raging where was her home, where lay her mother. How could she reach the place before the house was a wreck, and her dear mother was buried beneath the burned timbers of the roof, and the hot broken tiles?

She was there at last, before the great blaze, she could see that some one or two men were present.

'My mother, my mother!' she gasped, and fell on her knees.

'Be still, Glory, she is safe, no thanks to you.'

Mehalah lost consciousness for a few moments. The revulsion of feeling was so great as to overcome her. When she recovered, she was still unable for some time to gather all her faculties together, rise, look round, and note what had taken place.

The whole farmhouse was on fire, every wall was flaming, and part of the roof had fallen in. If once the house were to catch fire it was certain to go like tinder. A spout of flame came out of her mother's bed-room window. The fire glowed and roared in the old kitchen sitting-room.

Where is my mother?' asked Mehalah abruptly.

'She is all safe,' answered Abraham Dowsing, who was dragging some saved bedding out of reach of the sparks. 'She is in the boat.'

'The cow?' asked Mehalah.

'She is all right also. The fire has not caught the stable.'

'Who got my mother out?'

'I did, Glory!' answered Elijah Rebow. 'You owe her life to me. Why were you not here? Fighting your destiny, I suppose.'

Several articles were scattered about under the trees. The Sharlands had not many valuables; such as they had seemed to have been saved.

'Where is my mother? Lead me to her.'

'She is in the boat, Glory!' said Rebow. 'Come with me. The fire must burn itself out. There is nothing further to be done; we must put your mother at once under shelter. There is a cruel frost, and she will suffer.'

'Where is she? What have you done with her?' again asked Mehalah, still hardly collected and conscious of what she said.

'She is safe in my boat, well wrapped up. Come with me. You shall see her. Abraham

and my man shall stay and watch till the fire dies out, and see that no further harm is done, and then follow in your boat.'

'Where are you going?'

'I am going to place your mother under cover, at once, or the cold will kill her. Come on, Glory!'

Elijah led the way down the steep gravelly slope to the Rhyn. There floated his boat—his large two-oared boat, and in the stern half lay, half crouched, Mrs. Sharland, amidst blankets and bedding.

'Joseph!' shouted Elijah to one of the men by the fire, 'follow us as soon as you can, and bring Abraham Dowsing with you. We will fetch away the traps to-morrow.'

Mrs. Sharland was wailing and wringing her hands.

'Oh Mehalah! this is dreadful! too dreadful!'

'Step in and take the oar,' said Elijah impatiently. 'We must get off, and house the old woman as soon as possible, or she will be death-struck.'

The flames were reflected in the water about the boat, it seemed to float in fire.

'Take the oar!' ordered Elijah gruffly.

Mehalah obeyed mechanically. He thrust the boat off, and cast himself in.

No word was spoken for some time, Mehalah's eyes were fixed on her burning home, with despair. Her brain was numb, her heart oppressed. Mrs. Sharland wailed and wept, and uttered loud reproaches against Mehalah, which the girl heard not. She was stunned, and could not take in the situation.

The boat shot past the head of the Ray.

There stood the low broad bulk of the Burnt Hill. Mehalah roused herself.

Elijah looked over his shoulder and laughed.

'Up Salcot Fleet!' he said shortly.

'What!' suddenly exclaimed Mehalah, as a pang shot through her heart. 'Whither are we going?'

'To Red Hall,' answered Elijah.

'I will not go there!' exclaimed the girl in a tone of despair, as she drew her hands sharply from the oar, and the boat swung round.

'Take the oar again,' ordered Elijah. 'Where else can your mother go? You must think of her. She cannot be left to die of cold on the marshes, this night.'

A groan escaped Mehalah's breast. She re-

sumed the oar. 'Hold hard!' shouted Elijah after a row of half-an-hour. He sprang into the water, and drew the boat ashore.

'Give your mother a hand and help her to land,' he said peremptorily. Mehalah obeyed without a word.

Rebow caught the girl by both hands as she stepped on shore.

'Welcome, Glory! welcome to Red Hall! The new year sees you under the roof where you shall rule as mistress; your destiny is mightier than your will.'

END OF FIRST VOLUME.

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